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MARCH / APRIL 2025

SALT SUCCESS

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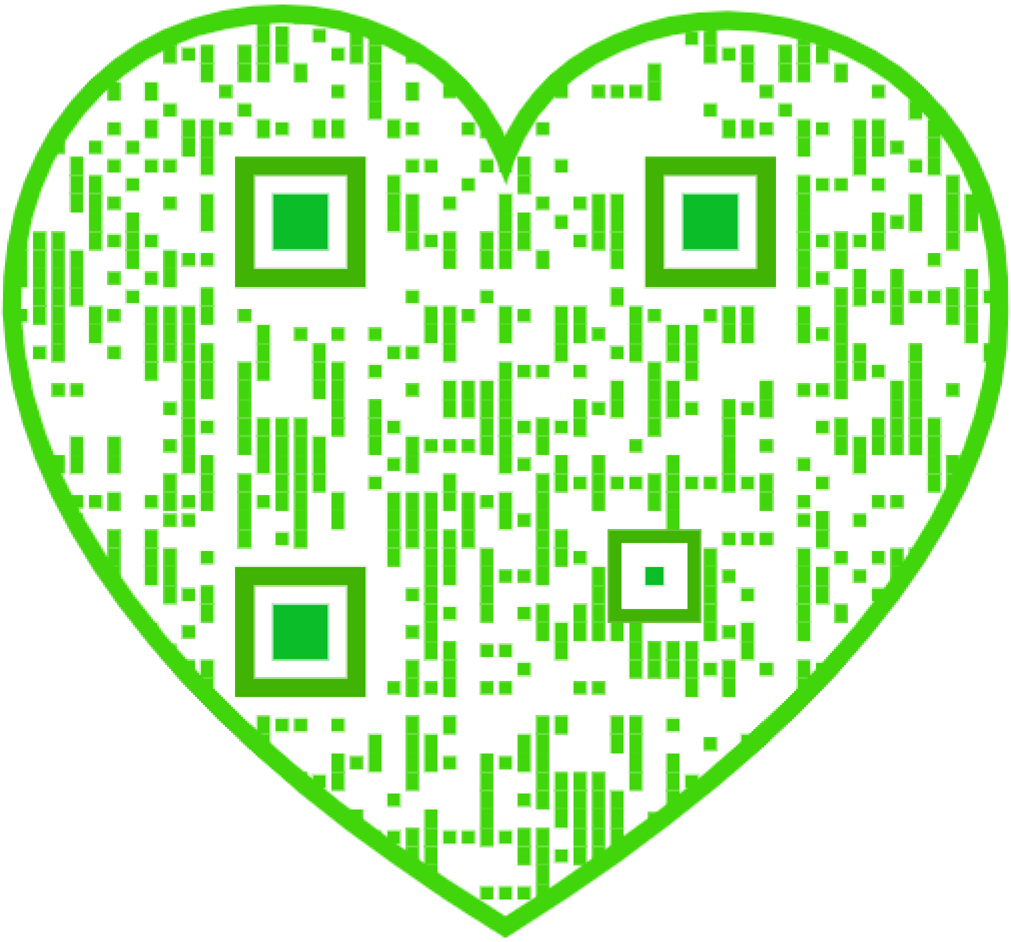

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MARCH+ APRIL 2025

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Cover: An aerial view of Mirror Lake in Lake Placid, which is considered one of the most developed lakes in the Adirondacks. Photo by Nancie Battaglia

Above: A member of the Jamaican bobsled team on a practice run at Mt. Van Hoevenberg. The team has been making an annual trek to train in Lake Placid since making its Olympic debut in 1988. Photo by Nancie Battaglia

TWO COMMUNITIES TACKLE MUCH-NEEDED SEWER PROJECTS

Scene at North Creek's Ski Bowl in early winter with snowmaking in full swing.
PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

In North Creek, ORDA takes charge of constructing its own wastewater treatment system, as town funds fall short of goal for municipal system

The state is adding to its $40 million investment in its North Creek Ski Bowl project near its Gore Mountain alpine center because of the need for a septic system that the host municipality has been unable to build or afford.

As a result, the Olympic Regional Development Authority (ORDA), which runs Gore and aims to open a new lodge in the hamlet of North Creek this fall, has chosen to build its own system to handle 12,000 gallons a day of wastewater.

ORDA went forward with the Ski Bowl project, which includes a zip line, a trail, a four-season lodge, a high-speed chairlift for year-round use and other amenities, expecting it would be able to tie into a septic system already in place.

That did not pan out, as a private system planned by FrontStreet Mountain Development, which has built eight townhouses near Gore and aspires to build at least one hotel, became unavailable to ORDA. And the backup plan, for the town of Johnsburg to build its first municipal sewer system, has been stalled by state permitting delays and a $2.5 million shortfall in funding.

In Elizabethtown, a 60-year journey to a public sewer system

Public sewer for Elizabethtown first became an item for discussion in 1966. Everything from costs to community objections ultimately sank every proposal.

Development has moved forward through the years, said the county's Industrial Development Authority co-director Jody Olcott, but public sewer is a missing piece in a hamlet that had about every other advantage: a hospital, car dealerships, a grocery and drug stores, a nursing home and a county government complex employing more than 500 people.

This time, engineers tucked the proposed plant in a more secluded spot behind the municipal golf course, a location for the treatment plant that was not objectionable to residents of the hamlet of 1,100 people.

Funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill will pay for one-half of the project's cost, was expected to exceed $30 million. ■

—James M. Odato, Tim Rowland

MORE PROTECTION FOR WOLVES?

Environmental groups want the state to include Canada lynx, cougars and wolves in its list of at-risk species for the updated State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP), which provides guidelines for managing threatened and endangered wildlife.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation put its draft list of "Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN)" and accompanying species status assessments out for public comment, with a Jan. 15 deadline.

Protect the Adirondacks Conservation Director and Counsel Christopher Amato said the omission is puzzling because the animals have shown the potential for returning to New York, and they should be part of the wildlife planning process.

"I think that the SWAP is and should be a plan that looks at the potential for reestablishment of breeding populations of species that for one reason or the other don't have a breeding population in the state anymore," he said.

State officials in Vermont confirmed a lynx sighting in the western part of the state near New York this past fall. There have been numerous wolf sightings in New York over the last few decades. A wolf encounter in December 2021 occurred when a deer hunter accidentally shot and killed a gray wolf south of the Adirondack Park in Cherry Valley. Genetic testing confirmed the animal was a wolf. ■

—Mike Lynch

NYS ADDS 965 ACRES NEAR CRANBERRY LAKE TO FOREST PRESERVE

PHOTO BY PHIL BROWN

The state has purchased 965 acres near Cranberry Lake in the northwestern Adirondacks, the state Department of Environmental Conservation announced late January.

The land will be added to the Adirondack Forest Preserve and includes 2.3 miles of the Oswegatchie River in the town of Clifton in St. Lawrence County, opening up paddling and fishing opportunities for the public.

The state purchased the land from The Conservation Fund (TCF), a nonprofit, for $870,000, using the state Environmental Protection Fund (EPF).

Identified as a priority project in the State's 2016 Open Space Conservation Plan, this acquisition consolidates portions of the 25,671-acre Cranberry Lake Wild Forest, connecting the Buck Mountain and Webster Tracts and the Cranberry Forest and Conifer-Emporium conservation easements, while preserving open space along 2.3 miles of the Oswegatchie River and approximately three miles of other classified trout streams on the property, including Peavine Creek and Thomas Brook. ■ —*Mike Lynch*

ON ADIRONDACKEXPLORER.ORG

MOOSE RESCUE: An icy search and rescue involved an unlikely subject: A moose. The bull fell through Lake Abanakee in Indian Lake, and hours later was freed, thanks to DEC Forest Rangers and ECON officers.

BEAR FAMILY'S DEATH: Six months after a state ECON officer shot a mother bear and her two cubs in Old Forge, community members try to make sense of the killing. A report from DEC reveals how the August event unfolded.

BIG SOLAR PROJECT MOVES AHEAD: The largest solar facility ever proposed in the Adirondack Park, a 40-megawatt array near Great Sacandaga Lake in the town of Mayfield, is closer to reality, despite outstanding concerns from local officials.

FROM TOP: NYS DEC, JESS PROCTOR, FRANKLIN SOLAR

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Through its news reporting and analysis, the nonprofit Adirondack Explorer furthers the wise stewardship, public enjoyment for all, community vitality and lasting protection of the Adirondack Park.

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AMID A PARKWIDE FIRST RESPONDER SHORTAGE, MEET THE LONG LAKE TEEN PIONEERING A NEW PROGRAM

In the small Adirondack town of Long Lake, 17-year-old Brooke Furlong has big ambitions. Between schoolwork, college applications, waitressing, three varsity sports and volunteering at the local Lions Club, it's hard to imagine a corner of community involvement she has yet to cover.

However, Furlong recently found another. In September, she made history as the first-ever junior member of the Long Lake Rescue Squad.

The squad launched its fledgling Junior Squad Member volunteer program in late May with the help of Furlong's father, Kevin Furlong. It aims to improve volunteer numbers, educate local teens, and secure the next generation of first responders in a rural population that is growing older. Furlong hopes to be the first junior member of many.

LONG LAKE
RESCUE SQUAD

PROVIDED PHOTO

Long Lake has a small, aging population typical of Adirondack towns. According to the latest census data, the median age of its residents is nearly 20 years older than the statewide average.

This results in a growing number of elders in need of emergency medical care, combined with a spike in calls during busy summer months. With many first-response teams composed primarily of retirees, maintaining volunteer help in the long term has become a top priority.

"I can't stress enough for other young people to get involved in the community in the Adirondacks, because there's so few people up here. Everybody's stronger together," she said. ■ *—Arietta Hallock*

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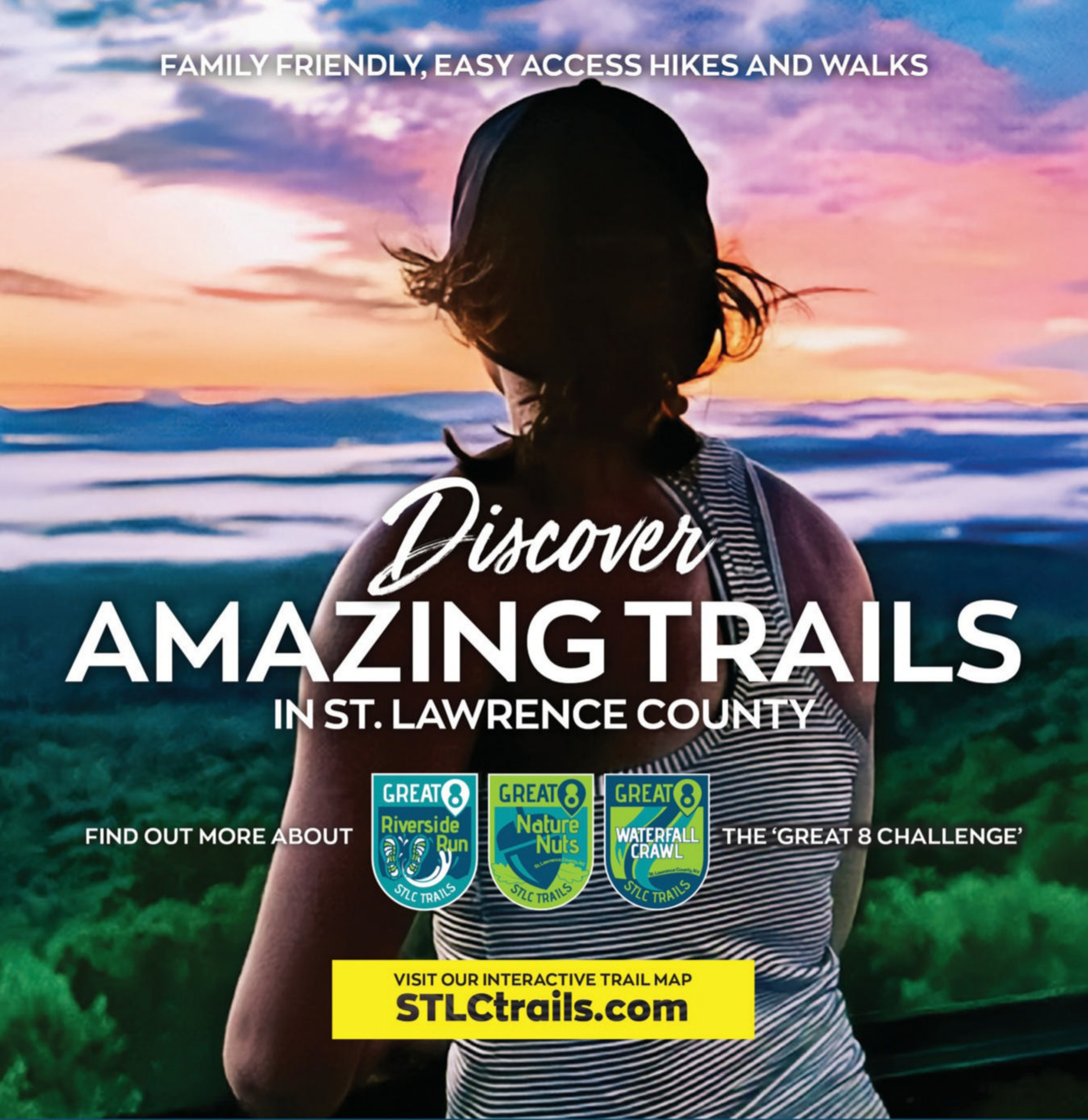
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State should do more in reducing road salt

Marie McMahon runs a snow-removal business in Lake Placid that focuses on more environmentally friendly solutions.
PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

More towns and villages in the Adirondack Park are doing the hard work of keeping roads safe for drivers while also protecting drinking water, lakes, and streams by using less salt on winter roads. But even as municipalities take the lead, New York state—the largest user of road salt in the country—is lagging behind.

It's time for the state to catch up, and stop this needless pollution.

Consider the commendable record across the Adirondacks:

- By measuring salt use and treating roads with brine prior to storms, the town of Hague reduced its road salt usage by 70%, directly reducing chloride concentrations found in Hague Brook, which spills into the northern end of Lake George.
- Working in tandem with the Ausable Freshwater Center, Lake Placid introduced snow removal best practices and implemented infrastructure improvements, turning around dangerously high concentrations of salt in Mirror Lake (see page 12).
- Washington County, Plattsburgh, and Peru are applying brine to roads ahead of storms, which allows reduced use of salt and sand—and it also cuts down on costly postseason cleanup.
- That's not all: 26 more town and county highway departments have come together in the Safe Water, Safe Roads Network managed by the advocacy group AdkAction, with the goal of reducing road salt and sand use in their communities by 50%.

So here's the question: Where is the state, which has long proudly claimed national leadership in environmental protection?

It has been five years since a bill to reduce road salt pollution in the Adirondacks became law, and two years since the Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Task Force, formed under that law, released its final report. Now, finally, the state is implementing some of the report's recommendations—but not all.

So for residents whose drinking water and private property have been damaged by this decades-old approach to clearing roads, the long and frustrating wait continues. For all Adirondackers who enjoy our lakes, rivers and streams, the worry about salt pollution hasn't gone away.

Even some members of the task force joined key environmental advocates in voicing disappointment that the final report didn't include a specific action plan for carrying out the recommendations. Without those specific steps by which to measure success, the recommendations are little more than good ideas. We've heard a lot of those.

People who care about this issue could finally get the help they need, with legislation under review by the Assembly Transportation Committee. A bill introduced by Assemblyman Billy Jones, D-Chateaugay Lake, would establish much-needed oversight of salt reduction efforts statewide. It would set up an interagency council and an advisory committee—made up of nongovernmental organizations, scientists, highway users and others—to make further recommendations around salt reduction, and then report progress.

If the Jones bill becomes law, it could fill the big gap that was left by the Adirondack Road Salt Reduction Final Report—namely, accountability.

State officials say they are in the process of working on the recommendations: They are creating new chloride standards to protect aquatic life, setting up training and water-quality grants for municipalities, and buying more brine. That's commendable, but the state hasn't yet fulfilled other important recommendations, such as creating a public database of state and municipal salt use (the state already provides this information to a national database). And no easily accessible process is yet available for residents impacted by salt pollution to report issues.

The continued delay in addressing this long standing issue highlights the need for stronger action. It's admirable that municipalities have taken up the task at hand. But now the state must match their efforts with concrete plans for accountability, transparency, and faster implementation. The health of the Adirondack Park's ecosystems and the safety of its residents depend upon it. ■

TRACY ORMSBEE, publisher

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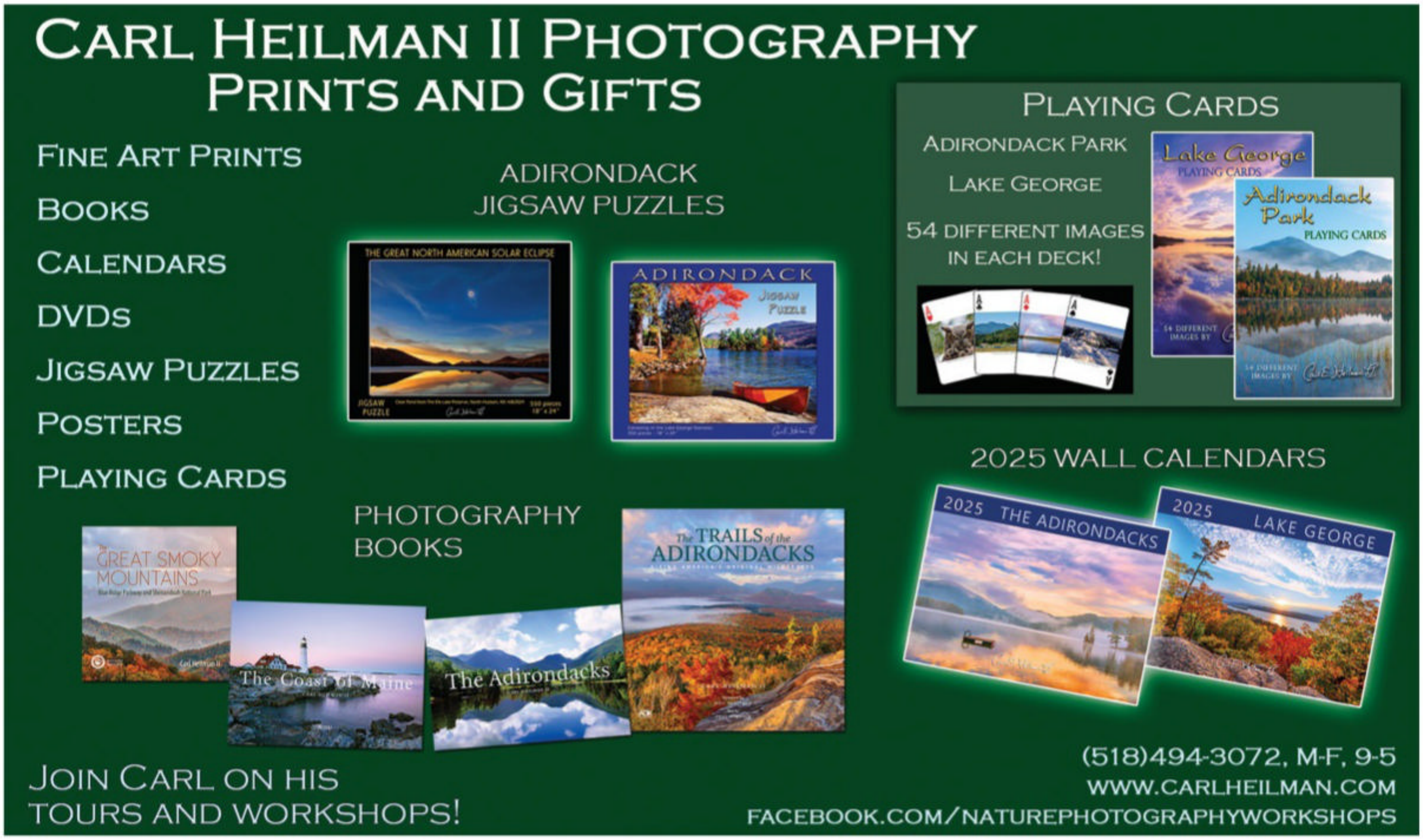

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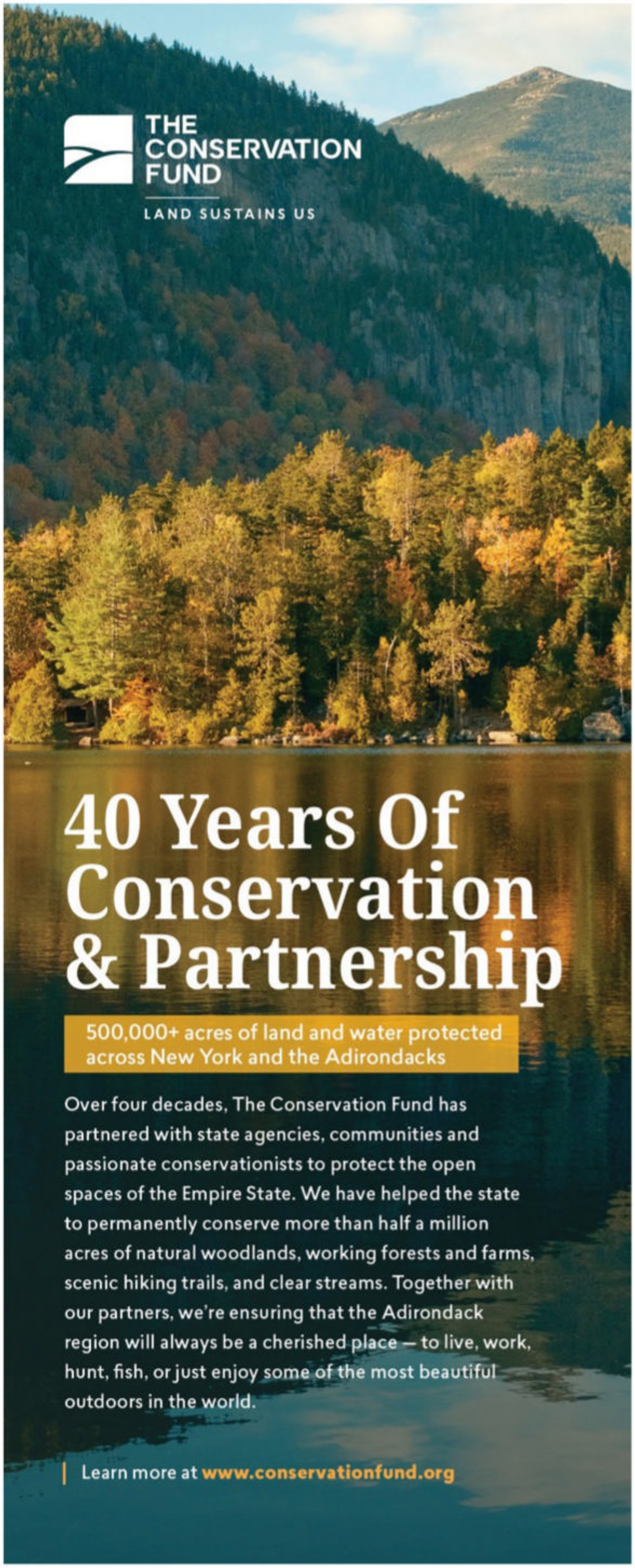

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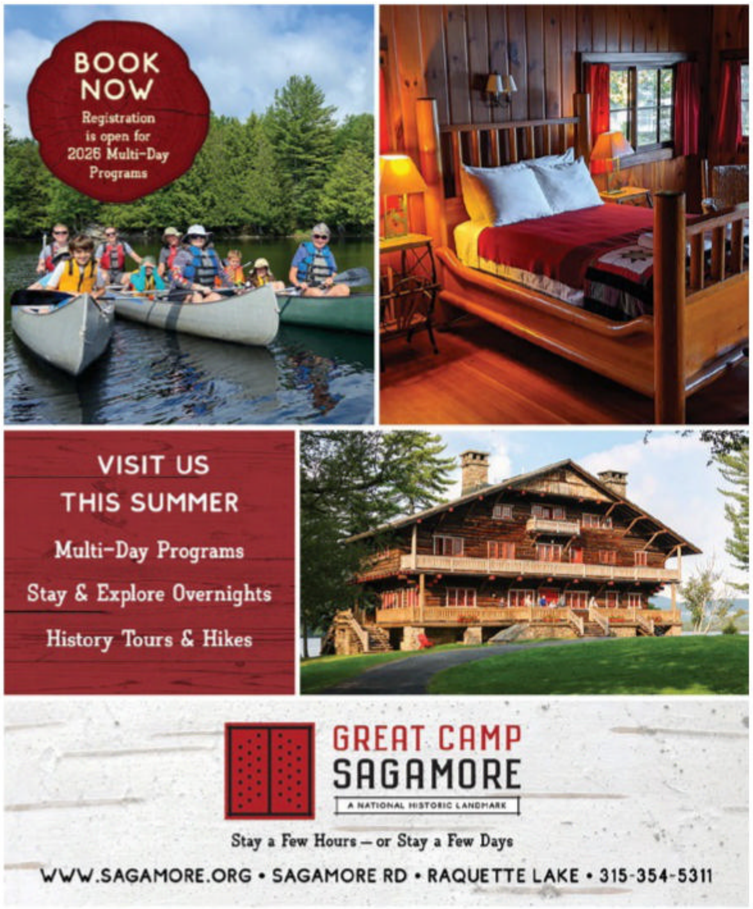

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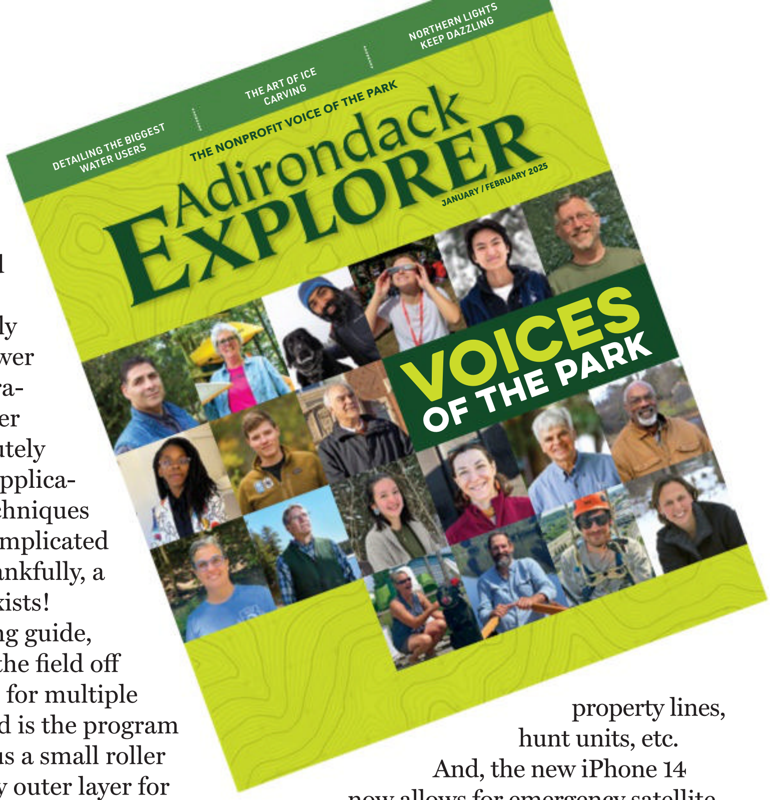
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Looking for more about green groups

Thank you for the article “Green groups at a turning point” (January/February), especially the summary descriptions of the five organizations. While definitely helpful, much of the information presented was non-specific and failed to differentiate the organizations from each other. How about a follow-up, simply listing the top three objectives in the next three years, and the top three accomplishments in the last three years, for each group? That would be extremely helpful to those of us trying to decide which organizations to support.

Art Reidel
Elizabeth, Colorado, and
Schroon Lake, NY

Sharing a love of raccoons

With regard to the article on raccoons (“Warm winter arrivals” January/February), we have had raccoons on our property (east side of South Bay of Lake Simond where there are only three camps and they are water access only) since we bought the property in 1981.

In June, when I was often alone and always quiet, a raccoon would begin showing up around 4 p.m. She would nose around and then climb up the pole to the house-shaped feeder. There she would sit on top of the feeder, open the hinged top and shovel handfuls (pawfuls) of seeds into her mouth. Since she was obviously a nursing mom, I felt that we moms should stick together. One evening when a group of us was having an early picnic supper on the porch and all were inside clearing the table, Sadie (for that is what we named her) started climbing up on the table. "Get down, Sadie." We gently chased her away. Another time I was swinging in a hammock around the 4 p.m. hour when something told me to check the house. Sadie was in the dining room sitting in front of a screened door, eating a banana that had been on a shelf. She looked at me, then opened the screen door and left, leaving only the peel behind. I know raccoons can be rabid, but I repeat, Sadie was just a hungry mom.

Phyllis Thompson
Houston, Texas, and Tupper Lake, NY

Needing a tech update

In “Figuring out the way” (January/February) by Neil Woodworth, much of the technology and comments in this article are both outdated, and patently false. Opinions like “cellphones are fragile and suited for temperatures in the 60s and 70s” are simply not true anymore. The newer iPhones are extremely durable, waterproof, have longer battery life, and are absolutely suitable for backcountry applications. Additionally, the techniques recommended here are complicated and now unnecessary. Thankfully, a much better technology exists!

As a professional hunting guide, I spend countless days in the field off trail. Many of my trips are for multiple days. My preferred method is the program OnX on my iPhone 14, plus a small roller ball compass pinned to my outer layer for frequent reference. For longer, multiday trips we add an additional battery charger which will add 2.5 additional iPhone charges. This system will keep my phone charged for 5–7 days with frequent use. I’ve used this system all throughout the Adirondacks but also in the big woods of Maine, Alaska and Colorado. It’s never let me down.

To do this properly, you should keep your phone on Airplane mode and keep the screen brightness as low as possible. And yes, OnX maps work without cellphone service.

Compared to the outdated GPS units and paper maps mentioned here, the mapping software OnX provides is far superior. In addition to TopoMaps, OnX has 3D maps, satellite images of your area, and many other map layers that show things like private property lines, hunt units, etc. And, the new iPhone 14 now allows for emergency satellite messaging as an extra bonus.

This is a much better system, one that I’m sure the author would prefer if they gave it a try.

Alan Lambert
Queensbury, NY

Corrections: *An article by Gwendolyn Craig in the Jan/Feb 2025 issue titled “Green groups at a turning point,” erroneously states that Julia Goren is the first female leader of the Adirondack Mountain Club. Jo Benton was named director in 1996.*

In “The big why,” Lisa Ballard refers to a fatal avalanche on Marcy in 2002. There was never a fatal avalanche on Marcy. In 2000, there was an avalanche on Wright Peak that killed one skier and injured three others.

LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT STATEMENT:

Adirondack Explorer is committed to reporting on communities, both human and non-human, in the Adirondack Park in Northern New York state. However, we recognize that the Park as we know it is a somewhat arbitrary boundary imposed on a land with a rich history. Long before the Park’s creation, there have been thriving communities of Haudenosaunee, specifically Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) and Wabanaki, specifically Abenaki, people living in deep communion with these lands.

The Kanien’kehá:ka and Haudenosaunee play vital roles in maintaining the ecological balance of this region, and we not only acknowledge their past and present connections here but are determined to include Indigenous perspectives in our work.

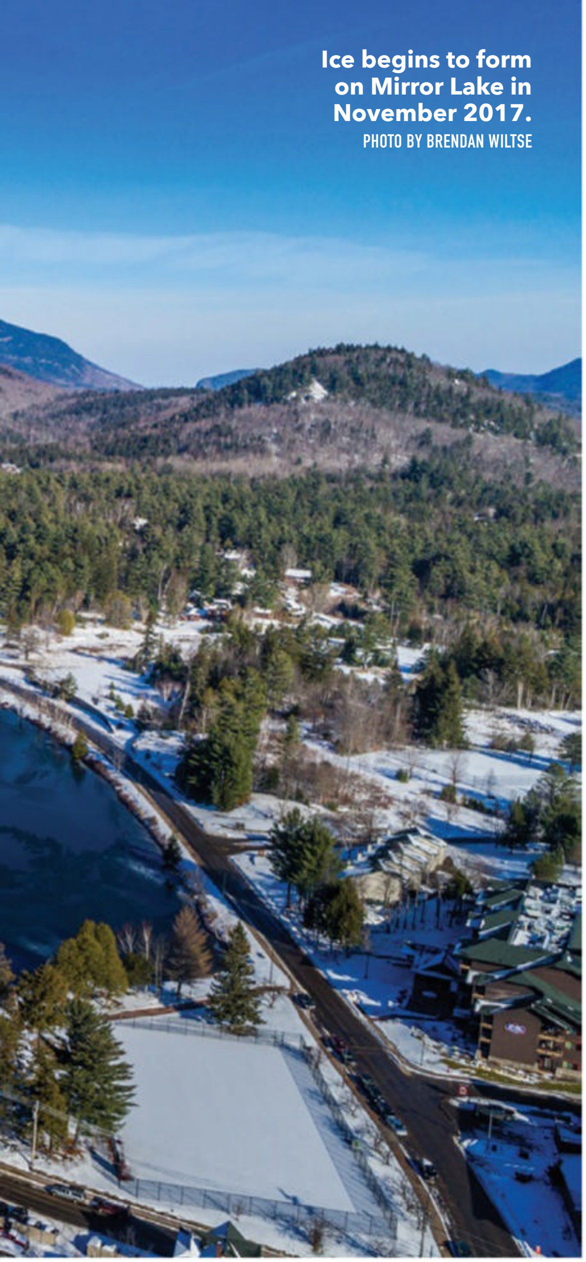
Turning over, turning around

How Lake Placid's efforts to reduce salt use helped bring Mirror Lake back from the brink

BY ZACHARY MATSON

When scientists 10 years ago started monitoring salt pollution in runoff flowing into Mirror Lake, they discovered their sensors were measuring chloride concentrations similar to those found in seawater.

At that time, nearly two dozen stormwater outfalls channeled road runoff directly into Mirror Lake. There was little to slow or stop water rushing off all of the village of Lake Placid's hard surfaces, collecting debris, sediment and road salt along the way. The lake's watershed mirrored conditions found in urban environments. More than one-quarter of the lake is ringed with development—even if



Ice begins to form on Mirror Lake in November 2017.
PHOTO BY BRENDAN WILTSE

its background is protected wilderness.

Researchers with the Ausable Freshwater Center (at the time known as the Ausable River Association) monitored the outfalls to measure pollution levels in the runoff. How salty was it as it reached the lake? At one site, their sensors measured chloride concentrations of 12,000 mg/l, so high it effectively reached the limit of what the sensor could measure.

"This is many thousands of times higher than what we would expect to see flowing into an Adirondack lake," said Brendan Wiltse, who led research on Mirror Lake for nearly a decade. "We needed data loggers calibrated for seawater."

The problem in Lake Placid grew so severe that salt loads were disrupting Mirror Lake's natural turnover, an important biannual occurrence that mixes nutrients and oxygen and reinvigorates zones of fish habitat. Scientists estimated that at one point in 2017, the preferred oxygen levels for lake trout had been squeezed entirely from the lake.

But coordination between researchers monitoring the lake and local leaders helped reverse the salt concentration trend line. Through an adoption of snow management best practices, an infusion of state money and a major infrastructure overhaul, the efforts have reduced salt use and redirected runoff away from Mirror Lake.

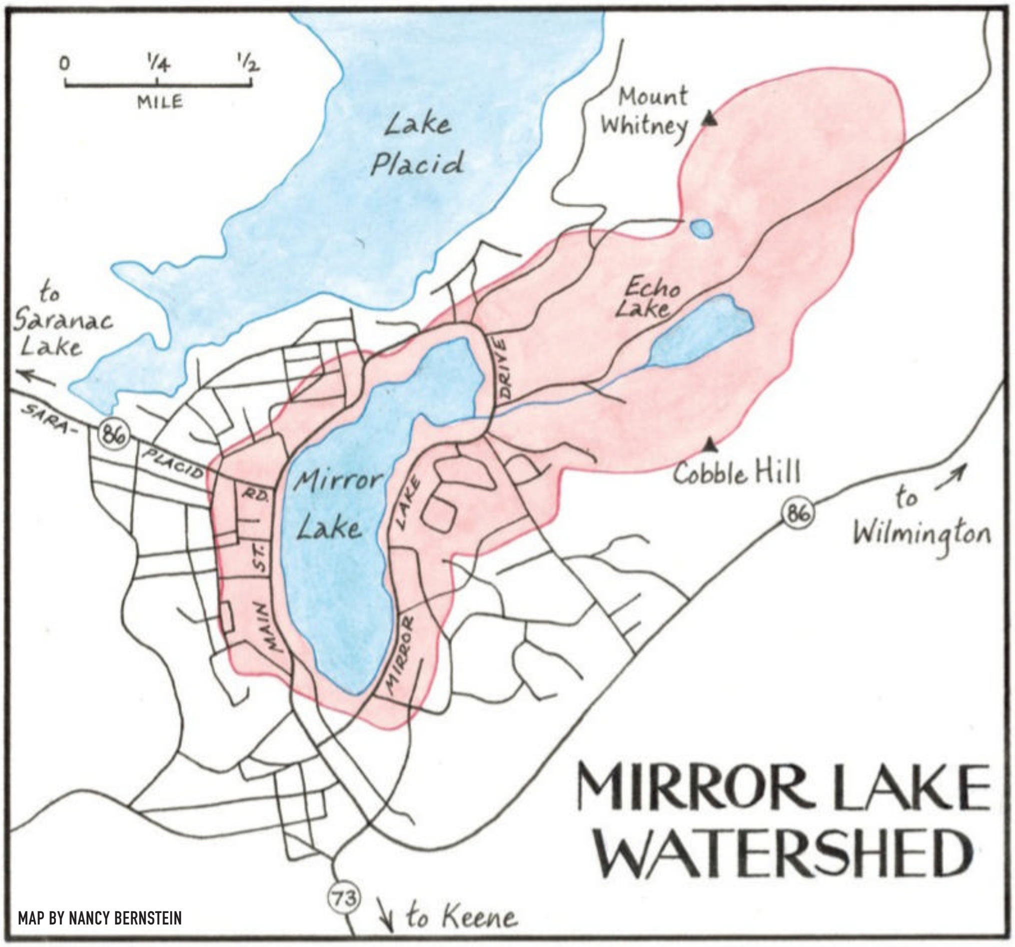
In the past few years, salt concentrations fell below a targeted threshold and the lake is mixing again. Advocates hope to grow public awareness and rein in salt use on private parking lots, driveways and sidewalks by encouraging more residents and contractors to use less.

A salty problem

A scientist assessing Mirror Lake in 1974 recorded chloride concentrations of 4 mg/l, notably higher than the less than 1 mg/l expected in untouched Adirondack lakes. By then Mirror Lake sat at the heart of the village at the heart of the Adirondacks. But very little data on the lake's chloride concentrations was collected in the ensuing decades, even as state and local road salt use exploded in the wake of the 1980 Winter Olympics. By the time Wiltse and colleagues ramped up regular sampling of the lake in 2015, chloride concentrations were 10 times greater, 40 mg/l, a level researchers have found to harm aquatic life.

Scientists expect Mirror Lake to undergo mixing events in the spring and fall, as water temperature and density trends toward equilibrium and distinct water layers combine. The river association enrolled Mirror Lake in the Adirondack Lake Assessment Program, which documents chloride concentrations and started collecting water samples every two weeks. Sampling included profile measurements that reveal different chloride and oxygen levels at various depths—an indication of internal lake dynamics. During his first sampling visit to Mirror Lake in May 2015, Wiltse was distressed by what he found.

"I observed very low oxygen in the lake and very high conductivity," Wiltse recalled. Researchers use conductivity as a proxy for salt levels. "The lake should have mixed a month earlier, there should have been plenty of oxy-



MAP BY NANCY BERNSTEIN

In the heart of the Adirondacks, Mirror Lake sees heavy year-round use from residents and visitors. Below: **Marie McMahon of Fire Side Wood LLC snow plows, shovels and brines surfaces at the Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid using environmentally friendly practices.**
PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

gen. It raised some red flags."

The data signaled a troubling reality. By that time of year, the lake should have started to mix and the oxygen and conductivity measurements should have been relatively consistent throughout the water column. Instead, as soon as Wiltse pulled his sensor from the water and recorded its readings, he theorized that chloride concentrations were building up in the lake depths and interfering with the annual spring turnover, exacerbating oxygen loss. The low oxygen levels threatened Mirror Lake's lake trout and its overall water quality.

Excessive salt use had stopped the lake from mixing.

"That was my hypothesis when I was on the water," Wiltse said. It took another four years to prove it.

Wiltse and his colleagues between 2015 and 2018 measured average chloride concentrations of 44 mg/l at the water surface, while clocking average concentrations of 65 mg/l at the lake bottom. The bottom concentrations increased throughout the winter, as more and more salt ran off Lake Placid roads.

In 2019, they published an article documenting the salt-induced disruption of the lake's natural turnover. Peer review had spoken: Mirror Lake earned the ignominious distinction as one of just a handful of lakes to experience that level of disruption.

Mirror Lake is a bit of an odd duck when it comes to Adirondack lakes and may well be the park's only urban lake, according to land use definitions.

The lake is entirely surrounded by state and local roads and includes one of the most developed shorelines of any in the park. Its 740-acre watershed contains over 1,000 meters of state highway, salted three times as heavy as other roads, and over 4.5 miles of local roads. Nearly 70 acres of paved surface, including 20 acres of parking lot, funnel stormwater and snowmelt toward the lake.

"It shows when you have a lake of this size, in this setting, what salt can do to it," said Bill Billerman of the Mirror Lake Watershed Association.

Lake Placid's Main Street, maintained jointly by state Department of Transportation plows and local highway crews, hosts thousands of winter tourists each year, and businesses rely on clear sidewalks and parking lots.

To keep snow from building up along Main Street, the village of Lake Placid highway department maintains two snow fields, where crews deposit snow hauled from downtown. A fleet of sidewalk sweepers keep walkways clear. As a December snowstorm started to form near Lake Placid, Brad Hathaway, the Lake Placid's superintendent of public works, planned for a team of workers to clear downtown beginning at 2 a.m. State plow drivers clear Main Street's driving lanes, pushing snow toward the parking lanes, before the village crews clear the parking spots and sidewalks, load snow into dump trucks and haul it away. It would take 15 workers around four hours to clear Main Street and side streets, Hathaway said.

"It's a much different operation here," he said. The goal is to keep the sidewalks clear of snow—even when the snow refuses to stop. "It's a constant effort."

As Wiltse and his colleagues collected more and more data on the consequences of salt pollution on Mirror Lake, they kept local leaders in the loop and helped advise on ways to reduce salt use. The river association coordinated grants to support equipment purchases and continue intensive water quality surveillance, including a weather station collecting continuous information on lake conditions.

"From the moment of that first test we knew there was a problem, and there was no reason

THE ADIRONDACK ROAD SALT TASK FORCE PROGRESS REPORT

A panel of experts in 2022 released a report of recommendations to minimize road salt pollution. State agencies have made headway on some of the proposals while progress is less obvious on others. Here's a summary of the key recommendations and progress so far:

Test the use of low-salt strategies on active plow routes in the park	🟩	DOT completed a series of pilot projects near Keeseville, Lake George and Lake Placid, finding best management practices, especially the use of brine, could significantly reduce salt use
Establish chloride-based water quality standards and set salt reduction goals for most impacted lakes	🟨	DEC is working on water quality standards updates that could include a new chloride standard to protect aquatic life, potentially more stringent than the EPA's recommended 230 mg/l chronic standard
Expand the use of best management practices to minimize overuse of road salt	🟩	DOT is expanding the use of brine and other approaches tested in the Adirondacks to other parts of the state
Provide snow and ice removal training to local highway departments and private contractors	🟨	DOT has shared best practices with municipal highway superintendents and regional managers offer training and other services
Marshall funding opportunities to support salt reduction efforts	🟩	DEC included new salt reduction initiatives as eligible for water quality grants, funding around $15 million in recent awards
Create a publicly accessible online database to report and store salt use data of state and municipal users	🟥	DOT is "awaiting a consensus" among state agencies, municipalities and private contractors on how to move forward
Develop a public outreach and education campaign that focuses on best practices and the impacts of salt pollution	🟩	DEC is developing a "Don't Be Salty, New York" campaign to raise awareness of salt reduction among municipalities and property owners
Define a rapid and efficient process for residents impacted by salt contamination to file complaints and garner remediation support	🟥	DOT streamlined internal complaint processing but no clear process easily accessible on state website

Key: green = check is in the mail, yellow = some signs of headway, red = no public progress

Left to right: **Corey Laxson collects a water sample using a Kemmerer sampler.** PHOTO BY BRENDAN WILTSE **Snow removal operations in Lake Placid include snow plows from various municipalities, snow roller brushers and shovels, with efforts around Mirror Lake and on Main Street lessening the use of salt to protect water quality.** PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

not to pay close attention to the threat," said Kelley Tucker, executive director of the Ausable Freshwater Center.

Lake Placid and the town of North Elba, which also maintains roads in the watershed, invested in more effective plow blades and salt tracking devices. The village upgraded its sidewalk sweepers and switched from spinners that spread salt widely to a more controlled dropper. "On the old ones, half the salt went into the road, half went into the buildings and a little was left on the sidewalk," Hathaway said.

Wiltse spent years offering updates on the science at local meetings.

"Once they understood the problem as well as we did, the conversation shifted to, 'OK, what can we do about this?'" he said. "My fundamental belief is that highway departments don't want to be doing harm to the lake. Going in and pointing fingers and being adversarial never made sense to me."

Rerouting runoff

The village had been planning a major overhaul of Main Street infrastructure for a decade, and local leaders saw the upgrades as an opportunity to slow the flow of salt-contaminated runoff into the lake.

With Main Street ripped up in 2021 and 2022, construction crews installed a trio of large retention basins—underground domes about the size of four school buses—one underneath Brewster Park at the end of Main Street and two underneath downtown parking lots. Stormwater flows into the basins and slowly infiltrates the groundwater, rather than running directly to the lake.

"The winter before the retention basins went in, you can see huge spikes in conductivity all winter long," Wiltse said of the salt monitoring data. "The winter after those spikes all but disappeared."

Driving north on Main Street, drivers reach a left bend where Main Street splits with Mirror Lake Drive, turns back to State Route 86 and climbs a steep hill. The hill section presented a tricky challenge to drivers, a challenge often treated with a thick layer of road salt. The road improvements included a subtle adjustment to bank the road and soften the 90-degree turn, so drivers can maintain more momentum through the turn, and road crews can drop less salt in the trouble spot.

Phil Snyder, who leads water quality monitoring at the freshwater center, said the lake has seen a reduction in chloride levels in recent years, a sign that strategies to reduce salt use and the Main Street overhaul are paying dividends. Chloride dropped below 40 mg/l, a goal the researchers and local leaders had set, but the concentrations remain high. A more ambitious goal of reducing concentrations to 10 mg/l would require far more significant salt reductions and time to flush away salt that has accumulated in soils and groundwater over many years of use. Concerns remain about the buildup of salt in the retention basins and groundwater, posing a different kind of lurking threat.

"If you start applying real solutions to these problems, you can affect them quickly in some places," Snyder said. "The lake is behaving in a more natural state, but it's teetering on that line."

Putting students to work

Marie McMahon still tears up when she tells the story about the moment she decided to get off salt.

McMahon and her partner Wes Schock run Fire Side Wood, a landscaping, firewood and snow removal business in Lake Placid, and an employee called her out to one of their sites. The employee had used an entire 50-pound bag of rock salt on just over 400 feet of sidewalk—far more than the d shovels and brines osage suggested on the back of the bag.

"He only needed, if you did the math, 22 cups," McMahon said. "When I saw the sea of green all the way down the walkways, I literally burst into tears. In that moment, I realized we were contributing to the problem."

McMahon set out to use more chloride-free approaches after the realization of her own contribution to Mirror Lake's salt pollution. "I didn't know how. I just knew that was the goal," she said. "If we have the privilege of living here, we also have the responsibility of taking care of this place."

Marcy Fagan, chair of the Mirror Lake Watershed Association and a science teacher at Northwood School, saw a teachable moment in the story of Mirror Lake.

Fagan used the backyard example to help students understand why and how lakes mix and the ways human activity can disrupt natural processes. Working with McMahon, Fagan started to introduce her students, and the campus, to the gritty work of reducing salt use.

She divided students in her Adirondack science classes into groups charged with the responsibility to keep certain building entrances on campus clear of snow. Get out the shovels, students.

First, they mapped the campus, researched appropriate salt loads and coordinated with the school's facilities director. McMahon is helping with a chloride-free brine as the students aim to lessen the salt the school puts into the watershed.

"It's more exciting for them to be out doing," Fagan said. "We still have a lot of salt in the water. It's getting better, but we still have a long way to go."

McMahon has a contract to keep the parking lots and sidewalks clear of snow at the Olympic Training Center in Lake Placid, where they are working to finetune their practice. She uses chloride-free brine on sidewalks and tested a half dozen shovels to see which worked best. She hopes to add cameras to the lot that record weather conditions and offer insight into how much snow has fallen.

McMahon is seeking to build a niche as a snow removal contractor mindful of salt's negative impacts, while sharing what she learns with others. She said she has heard from caretakers of large camps around Mirror Lake interested in the approach.

"If people become aware there is another way, they will demand it," McMahon said.

McMahon said she is encouraged by signs of progress but still wants to see the state do more to contribute to the solution. "If private contractors and municipalities can make it happen against the odds, I have a question for DOT: What the hell?" ■

ZACHARY MATSON is an Explorer reporter specializing in water issues.

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Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe sets goal to lower salt use

EPA grant supports tribe as potential case study

BY ZACHARY MATSON

When researchers at Paul Smith's College raised warnings about high salt levels in wells across the Adirondack Park, Les Benedict couldn't help but think about what that meant for the waters flowing through the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation.

The St. Regis and Raquette rivers both terminate and flow into the St. Lawrence River on tribal territory, and a long history of industrial pollution has impacted the Indian nation. A problem in Fort Jackson or St. Regis Falls or Santa Clara is likely to make its way to the reservation, Benedict thought.

"We are downstream of everything," said Benedict, assistant director of the tribe's environmental division. "We are affected by everything that flows down the river."

The growing discourse around salt pollution and efforts to reduce it in the Adirondacks spurred Benedict to study the issue. In 2022, the tribe received a $302,000 pollution prevention grant from the Environmental Protection Agency focused on salt reduction, one of the first such grants funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

This winter, tribal snow removal crews are using those funds to outfit trucks with cameras, temperature sensors and tracking equipment. A recently installed camera in the parking lot of the tribe's new community services building records air and road temperatures and captures images every few minutes of snow conditions in the lot.

The upgrades unleashed a stream of new data. The drivers who clear many of the reservation's parking lots track salt use, refine operations and even retrace the exact movements of a plow through a parking lot.

"It's a lot of data, a lot of details," said Joe Francis, the tribe's director of facilities management, who oversees snow removal at around 50 buildings. "We can see in real time as things change."

The new equipment also enables more control of how much salt is falling from the back of trucks. Drivers can set a salt application rate that automatically adjusts to vehicle speed. When the vehicle stops, so does the salt.

"It takes some of the stress of the operator out of the equation and lets the computer do it," said Rob Vopleus, a consultant with WIT Advisers working with the tribe.

Similar equipment is being used in Warren County, Peru, Edinburg, Lake George and other Adirondack communities. The improved technology, which Vopleus said takes a couple of years to get used to, enables more precise optimization of salt use.

The data allows snow removal crews to determine how much salt they actually need to maintain safe parking lots in different snow conditions. It also serves as a backup to re-

SAINT REGIS
MOHAWK TRIBE
kwarihwaienawá:kon
unity Services Building

Therma TRACK

From left to right: **Joe Francis, the tribe's director of facilities management, Tony David, director of the tribe's environmental division, and Les Benedict, deputy director of the environment division, stand in front of the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe's new community services building.** Photo at right: **As part of a federal pollution prevention grant, the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe installed temperature sensors on plow trucks to help optimize its salt use.** PHOTOS BY TOM FRENCH

The St. Regis River flows under state Route 37 in Hogansburg, as it nears its confluence with the St. Lawrence River.
PHOTO BY TOM FRENCH

spond to complaints about parking lot conditions, examine accidents or communicate with the public about efforts to limit salt use while maintaining safe lots and walkways.

"This is an opportunity to show the rest of the community how well they do the job," Francis said.

Vopleus said the more road departments work to limit their salt use, the more they find room to go even further.

"Even when people reach a high level of sustainability, there is still more they can do," he said.

As part of the grant, Benedict led a study that concluded the tribe's waterways and soils are directly impacted by salt-polluted runoff from parking lots and roadways. State Route 37, which is maintained by the state Department of Transportation, slices through the reservation and crosses the St. Regis and Raquette rivers.

"The challenge for the tribe and highway authorities is to ensure the wise use of road salt to reduce these impacts through careful and data-driven applications," according to the report.

Of over 100 acres of parking lots on the reservation, nearly 40% are in close proximity to wetlands. The tribe's environmental specialists for years have monitored water quality on the St. Regis, Raquette, Grasse and St. Lawrence rivers. Each winter chloride levels rise as the winter storms pile up.

"You always had a detectable spike," said Tony David, director of the tribe's environmental division.

Management of snow removal in the reservation is divided. While the facilities division is upgrading its equipment through the EPA grant, a different tribal division clears the reservation's non-state roads. Francis said other division leaders are showing interest in what his division is doing. The tribe also organized a salt reduction training at the Akwesasne Mohawk Casino in September, inviting private contractors to learn about best practices and strategies.

The grant will fund replacement of an old dilapidated salt storage shed with a new one built in an area further from wetlands. They plan to explore the use of brine on parking lots and sidewalks, which minimizes salt used but presents challenges in frigid conditions.

Even after the grant runs out, the tribe's environmental officials hope the experience will help press the case for more investment in the future.

"Under the old paradigm, you could easily mistake [salt] consumption with productivity," David said.

With new technology and a focus on minimizing salt use, they can start to invert that assumption. Perhaps productivity can be achieved with less consumption, less waste and fewer environmental harms, David said.

Before the technology upgrades, the facilities crews didn't know how much salt they put down on any given pass. Now they can start to dial in the amount they need.

"All we could say was we need more salt," Francis said. "With the systems we are now using, it's more consistently applied. The goal is to use the right amount: not under use or overuse." ■

Black flies: Scourge or spring rite of passage?

A look at Bti and the debate around its use

BY TIM ROWLAND

In the middle of the 19th century, disease wiped out great colonies of European silkworms, causing garment manufacturers to turn to the reclusive island of Japan for a source of silk. The silk trade inevitably introduced silkworm mortality to Japanese shores as well, where in 1901 a scientist by the name of Shigetane Ishiwata tried to figure out what was going wrong.

His research, according to the National Library of Medicine (NLM), focused on a bacterium from dead silkworm larvae, information that was useful to the German scientist Ernst Berliner, who isolated a related strain from dead Mediterranean flour moth larvae he found in a mill in the German state of Thuringia. He named it Bacillus thuringiensis—Bt.

It took another 25 years for science to figure out that the proteins in Bt, which occurs naturally in the soil, made for an effective insecticide by preventing hatches of problematic insects, including mosquitos and flour-eating moths. (Other, non-insecticidal proteins in Bt are toxic to some forms of human cancer cells.)

A new line of black fly defense

Bt was first registered as an insecticide in the U.S. in 1961, and has been genetically introduced to crops since 1996, greatly reducing dependency on chemical insecticides, according to the NLM.

Jimmy Cunningham dresses for battle with black flies. EXPLORER FILE PHOTO BY MIKE LYNCH

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK JOSEPH SHARER

Before Bt was introduced to the Adirondacks in 1982, individuals were left to battle the lawless insects for themselves, and came up with an inspired directory of home brews with ingredients including ammonia, Vaseline, turpentine, olive oil, pine tar and such.

Yet today in the Adirondacks, Bti—the added "i" refers to the israelensis strain most effective against gnats, mosquitoes and black flies—isn't entirely without controversy. Witness an Explorer story by Chloe Bennett on black fly treatments, which garnered more than 100 impassioned social media comments, voicing concerns for human health; the relative value of black flies as a food source for birds and fish; its potential to harm "good" insects; and, in a more cultural vein (this is social media, after all), whether black fly defense should be a matter of personal responsibility and the common refrain that real Adirondackers certainly should be able to shrug off a few bites.

A spring tradition

Ernst Berliner had presumably never met an Adirondack black fly, but his discovery is now knitted into the culture here, as every spring, town employees and contractors sally forth into sundry rivers and streams to apply Bt in order to keep the marauding hordes at bay.

When we bought our Adirondack property in 2014, the first person we heard from was not the welcome wagon, not the assessor, not any favor-currying politician, it was from the black fly combatants who somehow found us in our Mid-Atlantic home and wrote seeking permission to apply Bt in the flowing waters of our soon-to-be new home.

Bites aside, black fly strains (there are thousands worldwide) in this neck of the woods pose no particular risk to humans through the transmission of disease. Stagnant water is often blamed for insect infestations, but black flies need running water to thrive. The larvae knit something of a silky sling on rocks or sticks and hook to it with tiny barbs in their midsection, letting the current deliver their meals. It is the female that bites, because she needs blood to produce eggs—male black flies can't draw blood and demonstrate little interest in humans altogether.

Certainly no less an authority than Adirondack Murray—whose writings introduced many city slickers into the howling wilderness in the 1800s—felt black fly phobia was overblown. Black flies in his view were "one of the most harmless and least vexatious of the insect family … a monster existing only in men's feverish imaginations."

He then went on to describe how a few simple precautions against the insect could negate the threat, which involved wrapping oneself in so much fabric it would have made mummification look like a string bikini.

Black flies are a pest, it is true, but they are also a totem, a seasonal signpost and even, dare we say, a matter of pride. While people in other locales make note of the first robin of the spring, the first daffodil, the first peeper, we duly mark the commencement of the season with the first black fly.

Serious Adirondackers also know that there are black fly attacks and then there are Black Fly Attacks.

According to Purdue University, black flies in untreated areas can become so severe that outdoor activities are basically impossible, and in some extreme cases have been fatal to animals. Milk and egg production can be negatively affected by black flies, and in Pennsylvania, the Department of Environmental Protection notes that a bad season of black flies has a measurable negative effect.

Black flies are attracted to darker colors and carbon dioxide, so to minimize their impact, wear light clothing and don't breathe.

Ecological impacts

Bt and the chemical DEET (the active ingredients in most bug sprays) have battled black flies to at least a draw, but human comfort isn't the only consideration. Rich Redman, former president of Trout Unlimited, said the great fly-fishing guru Fran Betters of Wilmington was among those who recognized the value of the black fly to the ecology. "Kill the larvae and you decrease the food source," Redman said. "All to keep the tourists happy and spending money in Lake Placid. If they really want to experience the Adirondacks, then they can deal with the bugs just like the rest of us do."

The Pennsylvania DEP agrees that "Black flies play an important role in aquatic and terrestrial food chains where they are preyed upon by many insect predators, fish, amphibians and birds."

And "black flies are important filterers of our waterways," wrote naturalist Ellen Rathbone in the Adirondack Almanack. "In fact, when water gets too full of organic matter or nutrients, the amount of dissolved oxygen decreases and very little can survive in it. Black fly larvae are indicators of good, clean water."

So there you go, black flies are good for the ecology—except …

Black flies are a complicated issue. We'll leave it to Rathbone, who probably sums it up best: "While many of us would just as soon not have to deal with another black fly, we should all remember that every living thing on this planet has its rightful place. It's only when the delicate balance is thrown out of whack that problems occur. So, greet the black flies this spring with a smile." ■

TIM ROWLAND is a columnist, author and outdoors writer living in Jay.

Black flies swarm Tim Rowland as he calmly talks to hikers on Jones Hill. EXPLORER FILE PHOTO BY MIKE LYNCH

To dig into the issue, here are some commonly asked questions, with answers courtesy of the Environmental Protection Agency

Q. What is Bti?
A. Bti is a biological or a naturally occurring bacterium found in soils. It contains spores that produce toxins that specifically target and only affect the larvae of the mosquito, black fly and fungus gnat. EPA has registered five different strains of Bti found in 48 pesticide products that are approved for use in residential, commercial and agricultural settings primarily for control of mosquito larvae.

Q. Does Bti pose a health risk to humans?
A. No. Bti has no toxicity to people and is approved for use for pest control in organic farming operations. It has been well tested by many studies on acute toxicity and pathogenicity (and) based on these studies, EPA has concluded that Bti does not pose a risk to humans.

Q. Does Bti pose risk to crops or water supplies?
A. No. Bti has no toxicity to people, so it can be applied safely to mosquito habitat without a detrimental impact on food crops or water supplies. In fact, Bti can be used for pest control in organic farming operations. There are multiple Bti products and some are allowed to be used on certain drinking water (e.g., cisterns) while others are not intended for that use.

Q. Are there special precautions to be taken during Bti spraying?
A. No special precautions are needed for applying Bti. A number of Bti products are sold as "homeowner" products and are easy and safe to use. People do not need to leave areas being treated.

FRONTIER TOWN
Multiple Use Trail
HAMMOND POND WILD FOREST 0.8 mi.
SCHROON RIVER FOREST PRESERVE RD. 1.6 mi.
SCHROON RIVER 2.4 mi.
TRAIL
YIELD TO

A multi-use trail at the Frontier Town Campground, Equestrian and Day Use Area in North Hudson.
PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

North Hudson paves the way

How a title issue at Frontier Town is spurring the state to change policies

BY GWENDOLYN CRAIG

Frontier Town Campground, Equestrian and Day Use Area in the town of North Hudson is not quite "the gateway to the Adirondacks," state and local officials had hoped for when they donned cowboy hats for its grand opening in 2018.

Long ago title issues, one dating back more than 120 years, are delaying progress.

Since 2017, the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) has worked to purchase a 300-acre conservation easement on the property off of Exit 29 on the Adirondack Northway. It is near the former 1952-era theme park, Frontier Town. Though the state built the 90-acre campground and some equestrian and hiking trails, visions for a visitor center, event center, interactive exhibits and more have halted.

The sticking point?

The state Attorney General's Office requires perfect title, a string of legal documents outlining the property's ownership, and will not purchase title insurance to cover any outstanding encumbrances.

Instead of purchasing a $1,500 insurance policy, Town Attorney John Silvestri found himself in the precarious position of contacting 19 heirs of a frontier-era landowner in the unlikely event that the town's ownership would be contested. The town of 250 residents has spent about $50,000 so far, and the financial toll could be even higher, depending on the outcome of litigation to resolve the title.

It's "practically impossible" to have a perfect title, representatives of the New York State Land Title Association said, and the state policy extends beyond the town of North Hudson.

Land trust organizations across the state are holding onto land for New York—more than 100,000 acres at a fair market value of over

$150 million. The backlog, they say, is in part due to the state's title policy. In most real estate transactions, title issues would be covered under a 40-year title search plus the purchase of title insurance. Instead, land trust organizations report the state is searching back a century or more and refusing to purchase the insurance intended to cover unlikely ownership contestants.

The title work takes more time and is preventing land trusts from purchasing and conserving new land. It also hinders the state from meeting its goals of conserving 30% of its lands and waters by 2030. The state has just five years to protect about 3 million more acres.

Title insurance, said Connie Prickett, communications director of the Adirondack Land Trust, is "a low-risk way for New York to expedite cooperative land protection projects."

In a glimmer of hope for title insurance advocates, Gov. Kathy Hochul included in her annual agenda a hint that the state may change its policy. Stakeholders are eagerly awaiting more details.

"I am tickled pink that somebody finally woke up and realized what a terrible, expensive and wasteful policy…this is," Silvestri said, adding that any changes won't help the town of North Hudson now. "The cat's out of the bag," he said.

Gateway to the Adirondacks

In October 2018, DEC and town leaders celebrated the groundbreaking of the Frontier Town Campground, Equestrian and Day Use Area, an envisioned $32 million gateway. In 2019 it officially opened to campers and horseback riders.

Aside from its quick access off the Adirondack Northway, the campground is just 8 miles east of the Boreas Ponds Tract, which boasts spectacular views of some of New York's highest peaks including Marcy, Haystack, Gothics and Saddleback.

For the last several years, North Hudson had an agreement with the DEC for use of the property. The state spent more than $20 million on the campground and day use area. It spent another $260,000 on improvements in May 2021.

But when the DEC began investigating title records to fulfill a conservation easement, it dug up an issue on 25 acres as well as a foreclosure case from 1901 involving 204 acres.

The foreclosure involved Abel Skiff, who purchased the land in the late 1800s. In the record, Skiff's heirs retained three-eighths interest, while the mortgage holder foreclosed on five-eighths.

Silvestri said the risk of Skiff's relatives contesting the ownership was "almost nonexistent." But the state Attorney General's Office asked him to open what he called "a Pandora's box that can't be shut."

The town hired a private investigator and genealogist to research Skiff's family tree. It has since contacted 19 heirs, including a couple of Michigan lawyers, a Florida rabbi, a Las Vegas Spanish teacher and a retired school principal from Washington state, via a quiet title lawsuit. Such a legal action, the town hopes, will lead to the Essex County Supreme Court ruling the town's possession of the land for over a decade will null any of the heirs' potential ownership claims.

Silvestri expressed amazement that the state made such an investment in the campground infrastructure before the title issues were resolved. The land without improvements would have been worth a fraction of what it is now, Silvestri said, should a court rule in the heirs' favor.

The heirs

When the Explorer spoke to some of the heirs last year, they were unsure what to make of the ordeal. Some called it "a Christmas present" while others said they'd like some say in what happens to the property, but were not interested in any financial recuperation.

Some family members believed Silvestri was trying to scam them. He got a call from a sheriff in Wisconsin to investigate if the potential land claim was real. At least one heir, Silvestri said, refuses the town's contact.

An Essex County Supreme Court judge ruled last year that the town had not done enough to contact all the heirs and could not yet resort to advertising in newspapers as a last effort. Silvestri said he's working on contacting everyone again in hopes of compiling enough evidence to be allowed to advertise the quiet title lawsuit where relatives refuse his communication.

The DEC said it continues working on the separate potential outstanding interest in a 25-acre portion of the parcel. It had no additional updates to provide on either title issue.

"I've been a lawyer for over 40 years and this has been a pain," Silvestri said.

A poster child for title insurance

North Hudson became a poster child for the fact that New York is the only state in the nation that does not accept title insurance.

Catherine Canino, president of the New York State Land Title Association, called the

Title issues are delaying progress of the state's plans for the former Frontier Town property. Gov. Kathy Hochul has proposed changes to allow the state to purchase title insurance, making land transfers easier to do. PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA state’s desire for perfect title “practically impossible. A title with not a single lien, not a single overlap, not a single problem is rare.”

The title issue in North Hudson, she said, is not uncommon, especially in upstate communities where generational and overlapping ownership dating back so far can complicate the chain of title.

“Governments are wasting time and money trying to fix title issues such as those facing Frontier Town,” she said. “But if they had title insurance, the burden would have been on the title company to provide clear title.”

The Adirondack Land Trust said use of title insurance would help its efforts as well. While it hasn’t had a specific title issue hanging up its land conservation work with the state, Prickett said the extra legwork appears to be taking longer and holding up state land acquisitions.

Land trust organizations have also said a lack of staffing at the DEC and AG’s Office to do title research, appraisals and other conservation work has slowed the process over the years.

For example, the Adirondack Land Trust held 200 acres near Poke-O-Moonshine for two years before the state acquired it for the Forest Preserve in 2008. Prickett said the state took about six years to purchase the Four Peaks Tract in the town of Jay, which DEC added to the Forest Preserve last year.

The Adirondack Land Trust is currently holding six properties, about 300 acres, for transfer to the state Forest Preserve. Prickett said 25 acres were donated to the land trust and will be donated to the state. The rest of parcels the land trust paid a cumulative $485,000.

“Holding properties destined for state ownership costs land trusts money that could otherwise be used to protect additional lands,” Prickett said.

Kathy Moser, chief conservation officer at the Open Space Institute, said the lack of title insurance is impacting her organization. As of last year, OSI was holding seven properties the state plans to purchase valued at $7.8 million in Adirondack Forest Preserve counties and five conservation easements totaling $2.3 million.

The Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK), which was awarded a $500,000 Environmental Protection Fund grant in 2021 for its Cascade Welcome Center in the town of North Elba, has yet to see the money to assist with its approximately $2.5 million purchase. Conservation easement hangups with the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation were initially at the root of the delay.

Basil Seggos, former commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, speaks during a groundbreaking ceremony on Oct. 4, 2018, at the Frontier Town Campground, Equestrian and Day Use Area in North Hudson. PHOTO BY NYSDEC

Julia Goren, interim executive director of ADK, said the organization and Parks Department have finally signed an easement agreement, but are now waiting for the title review process, which has been going on for about six months, to finish. After, ADK hopes to receive its 2021 funding.

Andy Zepp, president of the Finger Lakes Land Trust, told lawmakers at a Jan. 28 budget hearing that the current title review process is one of the reasons the land trust is still holding 21 properties at $7 million for the state. Zepp said it was a lot for his small organization.

In 2023, Zepp said, New York only acquired 3,800 acres statewide at a value of $6.5 million.

The state’s slow land acquisition is also bringing to question whether the state will be able to meet its land conservation goals of protecting 30% of its lands and waters by 2030.

Sean Mahar, interim DEC commissioner, told lawmakers at the end of January that the state had protected about 20% so far.

Claudia Braymer, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, said the state needs to protect approximately 3 million more acres to reach its goals. Protect and other organizations are also calling on the state to increase its budget for land acquisitions.

The DEC told the Explorer it “is committed to achieving the conservation objectives,” adding that there is a “need for a rigorous due diligence process for any conservation acquisition that uses public resources.”

The state’s next steps

Silvestri laughed when he heard about the very last paragraph of Hochul’s 140-page State of the State agenda released at the beginning of January.

Under a section called “Make Open Space Accessible for All,” the Hochul administration recognized “the need for streamlined processes” for land conservation and suggested it would allow “the use of title insurance to expedite land acquisitions, granting the Department of Environmental Conservation the authority to independently acquire conservation easements, and reducing the financial hurdles faced by nonprofit organizations in their land conservation efforts.”

“It’s about time,” Silvestri said.

The DEC said it “applauds Gov. Hochul’s proposal,” as did many advocates.

But when Hochul released her proposed $252 billion executive budget in mid-January, there was no mention of title insurance.

OSI, the Adirondack Mountain Club, the New York chapter of The Nature Conservancy and others asked lawmakers to put title insurance into the state Assembly and Senate’s one-house budgets should Hochul not include it in her 30-day budget amendments.

The legislature and governor’s office have until April 1 to decide on a final budget. As of press time, it was unclear how title insurance may be included.

Other steps to assist with the land acquisition process were included in Hochul’s proposal, including a conservation exemption from the state’s mansion tax for land trusts and nonprofits. Hochul also proposed allowing the DEC to negotiate and acquire land conservation easements on its own.

During a January budget hearing, lawmakers asked Mahar about the status of the title insurance issue missing from the governor’s budget.

“We are in active conversations with the Office of the Attorney General right now regarding that,” Mahar said. “If we are unable to reach some agreement and consensus … we will be coming back to you to discuss additional legislation that may be necessary.” ■

GWENDOLYN CRAIG is the Explorer’s policy reporter, focusing on regulation.

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The town of Jay Community Center is home to a senior center, managed by Tiffany Thomas. It also has the capacity to serve as an emergency shelter.

PHOTO BY MIKE LYNCH

Seeking shelters from the storms

Communities work to improve emergency communications and sheltering capacities

BY MIKE LYNCH

In Indian Lake, the former Stewart's Shop reopened in the summer of 2022 as the town's welcome center. Food aisles were transformed into a cozy room with Great Camp-style furniture and the back-wall coolers were covered with images depicting Adirondack wilderness.

Like many community buildings in the park, the structure serves multiple purposes: hosting a food pantry, seasonal farmers market, chamber of commerce and office for the head of the town's economic, marketing and events department.

It is also headquarters for the One Call Emergency Alert system, which sends alert phone calls and emails during natural disasters to both seasonal and year-round residents who subscribe to this free service.

Equipped with a backup generator, new cooling and heating systems, it can serve as a daytime space for people dealing with an extreme weather event. (The town has other buildings, such as the local school, as designated overnight shelters.) It can also be a distribution center for water during a storm or power outage. The large walk-in freezer has been used by fire victims needing a place to put food.

Christine Pouch, Indian Lake's director of economic development and marketing, said recent weather events created the need for this type of use. She recalled how a July 2023 storm left dozen of guests at the Hemlock Hall lodge on Blue Mountain Lake needing to be evacuated. Many were taken to the Indian Lake School before they were able to go home or find other lodging.

"It would have been nice to have a more comfortable place," she said.

The welcome center is an example of adjustments local governments and emergency responders have been making to improve communications and keep residents and visitors safe.

Last fall, the town of Jay upgraded its cooling system at its senior center located in the town's community center. The town of Keene installed a new emergencies text alert system. Essex County's emergency management team launched an app that provides alerts and information. The American Red Cross, which underwent a nationwide restructuring to allow them to respond faster, is constantly looking to add new shelters.

A response to extreme weather events

The upgrades are being made to respond to the more frequent and severe suite of natural disasters and extreme weather events the region has seen in recent years.

In 2024, New York state saw 32 tornadoes, including about a half dozen in the southern Adirondacks. That's the most since the National Weather Service (NWS) started keeping

Where to find resources and facilities in your community:

Emergency Shelters: The American Red Cross coordinates with local and state agencies during emergencies. Its staff will set up overnight facilities in designated locations, such as schools, churches and community centers. **https://rdcrss.org/3QeyT3X**

Warming and Cooling Centers: Community centers, libraries, and senior centers are commonly designated cooling facilities. Some county websites also provide details. There isn't a comprehensive list of warming centers available, but county local governments will alert people to the opening of a warming station during a power outage. In addition, many cooling centers serve as warming centers during weather events. **https://bit.ly/4hWvceP**

Emergency Services: County emergency management services websites are good places to find information about preparing for disasters. **https://bit.ly/4hQMlY1**

Emergency Apps Examples: American Red Cross Emergency, Ready Warren County, Essex County OES and more.

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Clockwise from above left: **Madeline Clark and Mike Tripodi are regional disaster program managers for the American Red Cross. Christine Pouch, Indian Lake's economic development, marketing and events director, sits in the town's welcome center, which is outfitted to assist victims in emergencies. Horicon Town Supervisor Michael Geraci, right, stands with Food Pantry Supervisor Vicki Monthony, in the Horicon Community Center, which is equipped to serve as an emergency shelter.** PHOTOS BY MIKE LYNCH track in 1998. That's 11 more than 2011, the second highest total.

It was also a record breaking year for temperatures in some areas. In Plattsburgh, located just northeast of the park, the city recorded its highest mean average daily temp—49 degrees—since 1946, the start of the NWS' dataset. That's about 4 degrees higher than other years. During last summer and fall, drought caused a rare wildfire season in New York and neighboring states.

Not to mention, the remnant storms from hurricanes Beryl and Debby caused millions of dollars of damage to infrastructure to communities.

Because of the unpredictability and severity of these weather events, Sunita Halasz, project coordinator for the Adirondack Climate Outreach and Resilience Network (ACORN), said it's important for communities to have designated places, or emergency hubs, where people can get resources, such as water and dry ice, in times of need.

"Besides just being a place where some resources could be available on even just a limited basis, I think knowing that it exists creates a psychological feeling of safety for town residents—and that can also really help in times of emergency," she said.

These facilities can also be helpful for people who need to power medical devices.

One of the most well-equipped places is in Brant Lake at the town of Horicon's community center. This building is an official American Red Cross shelter that could house 88 people short term or 44 long term. It has a kitchen, backup power sources including solar panels, kitchen, and public Wi-Fi.

Horicon Supervisor Michael Geraci said the hub hasn't been used as an overnight shelter since he took office in 2021, but people do come in during power outages to keep warm and use the Wi-Fi to connect with relatives and friends and get updates on the current emergency.

"When you have no communications, when you don't know how long your power is going to be out, if you can't communicate, the anxiety is what drives your internal fear," said Geraci, who also is the chair of Warren County's public safety committee. "People just want to know exactly what's happening."

Seldom used, but still essential

While emergency shelters are essential during major disasters like the 1998 ice storm and Hurricane Irene in 2011, both of which left roads impassable and people without power for days, there is some unpredictability about when people will need them and they could go unused for years.

There are also situations like last July when 15 people had to be rescued late at night in town trucks from Champ RV Campground in Port Henry. Eight people found overnight refuge at the Moriah Fire Department.

But in many cases, people take care of themselves, multiple emergency managers told the Explorer.

In Essex, a town of roughly 600 people, town supervisor Ken Hughes said they've opened up the Whallonsburg Grange—which has a kitchen and common room—numerous times during weather events in recent years. However, he could recall only one person showing up. That occurred during a spring snow storm when power was out for several days.

"I find that people tend to just hunker down. They've got wood stoves, or they have family members that they stay with or they'll go to Plattsburgh or other places like Saranac Lake or Lake Placid," he said. "They'll drive to those places and take care of themselves."

> **"Besides being a place where some resources could be available on even a limited basis, knowing that it exists creates a psychological feeling of safety for town residents—and that can also really help in times of emergency."**
>
> –Sunita Halasz

The Grange did get used as a shelter during Irene.

Jay Supervisor Matt Stanley was living in Florida for college during the 1998 ice storm, but recalled his parents doing exactly as Hughes said. They hosted local family members at their house as they waited for power to be restored.

"Because my parents' house had a gas stone and wood heat ... everybody sort of collected together there instead of seeking shelter down here," Stanley said.

But the town of Jay has learned from past storms, especially Irene, that shelters can be essential during disasters and they have been continually upgrading their community center as an emergency hub and shelter. Its facility includes a large gym where cots can be set up, a commercial kitchen, showers, and back up power.

Stanley said the last time he remembered it being used as an overnight shelter was in 2011 during Irene, but it gets used during power outages. Several years ago, a flood displaced about 20 families but the Red Cross gave out vouchers for hotels, he said.

Red Cross to the rescue

Mike Tripodi is the regional disaster program manager for the Red Cross based in Glens Falls and serving the southern and eastern Adirondacks. He has also helped develop some of the current sheltering policies for the Red Cross on the national level.

The Red Cross is often called to assist with more serious situations. In December, it responded to Whitehall in Washington County, located just outside the Adirondack Park, when the community's drinking water reservoir went dry. The Red Cross set up a warming center and supply center and handed out 30,000 bottles of drinking water.

Tripodi frequently surveys Adirondack communities to add to the list of shelters and services Red Cross can use during a natural disaster or other emergency. His work includes visiting buildings and restaurants to find out their capacity to help out in emergencies.

He said the warming climate is changing the way Red Cross provides services because natural disasters are happening so frequently and unpredictably.

"We used to have a major hurricane every five, six years, so we had time to build things, but then we're just seeing this chronic disaster, disaster, disaster," he said.

In response, the organization has shrunk its regions, hired more staff, and shifted some of its approaches, including doing more community training. It is also looking to add more non-traditional shelters, like using summer camps during the off seasons.

"You can never say there is enough," said Ann Marie Mason, Warren County's director of emergency services. "We continue to make sure that we are as prepared as possible to meet the needs of our community and keep them safe." ■

MIKE LYNCH is the Explorer's climate reporter.

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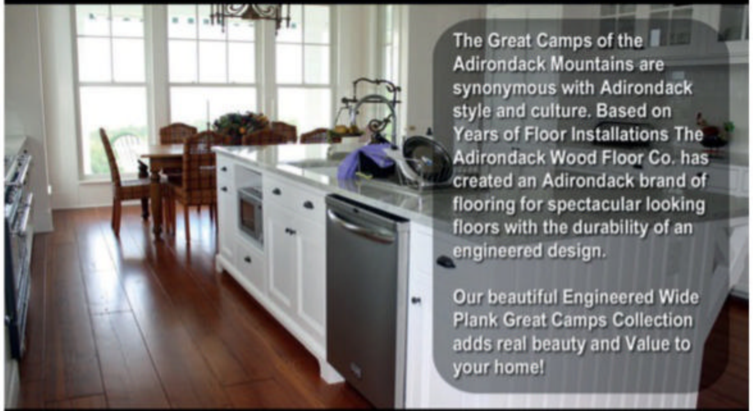

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Some of the llamas at Moose River Farm in Old Forge.

A wooly good time

Llama trekking with Moose River Farm in Old Forge

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JAMIE ORGANSKI

What do 10 llamas, George Clooney, Adirondack hiking trails and a photo shoot have in common? They are all part of the unique and memorable experience of llama trekking, a family-friendly excursion dreamed up seven years ago by Anne Phinney of Moose River Farm in Old Forge.

The idea of llama trekking was born from a program in which Phinney taught children about caring for animals. Children aged 8 to 12 would visit the farm one day a week in the summer and handle the animals. While Phinney continued to incorporate new animals into the program, something "wooly" was missing.

"I decided on llamas because they are a working animal, still more reliable than motorized vehicles for distributing supplies in the Andes Mountains," she said. "Llama fiber is a secondary purpose." What she didn't know was how much she would grow to love them.

After a two-year search, Phinney purchased two llamas from Dakota Ridge Farm in Ballston Spa.

"I walked my llamas through our farm and it was like lightning went through my body," Phinney said. There was no turning back.

Phinney invited visitors to join in on their daily walks, an idea that quickly became popular. "As word got around, I needed to add more llamas. Turns out llamas are sweet creatures who enjoy human companionship," she said.

A cross between a horse and a teddy bear, llamas are curious about meeting new people and are good listeners when it comes to following directions. They are smart, hard working and yet very sweet. They enjoy hugs, walks in the woods and even posing for photos with their walking partners.

The llama love multiplied quickly for Phinney. "What started as two llamas became three, became six, and now we have 10 llamas. I call it llama math. The llamas really do run the farm," she said. "And they know it."

Llama trekking basics

There are healing aspects of nature and animals, and with llama trekking, folks get to experience the best of both, said Phinney.

The treks have been a focal point of the farm for the past several years, and although Phinney misses the children's program, she loves conducting farm tour and llama walks, and meeting with families from the Adirondacks and beyond.

Phinney offers two types of llama walks: a full trek and a mini trek. The full trek ($30 per person) is a 1-mile loop and takes about 1.5 hours. The outing includes a guided llama walk through the farm's scenic trails and a farm tour where visitors meet all the animals. In addition to 10 llamas, the farm has five horses, two miniature donkeys named Bing and Frankie, goats that Phinney has dubbed her middle-school mean girls, even a 10-month old camel named Kipling. She also keeps a variety of turkeys, ducks, geese and chickens.

The mini trek ($20 per person) is geared toward those with low or limited mobility or small children who would do better with a shorter distance. The mini trek includes the farm tour and a short 10-minute guided llama walk.

While llama trekking is suitable for all ages and abilities, children need to be 8 years and older in order to walk their own llama. Younger children may share a llama with an adult. Phinney reminded llama trekkers to dress for the weather and wear appropriate footwear.

"No teenagers shivering in Crocs, and no flip-flops or sandals around hooved animals," she said with a laugh.

A personal pairing

Phinney said she enjoys matching up each llama trekker with their own llamas based on personality traits for optimal compatibility.

"Bluff, Majic and Malibu [the ladies of the group] stick together, as they do not particularly like the boy llamas. Bravo is the George Clooney of the llamas and he is gorgeous. Adonis has no sense of humor, is gentle, and all business. He walks the trail like a periscope. Stormy is bouncy like a big dog and therefore needs a walking partner who is confident. Ty likes to lick everyone's hair and Lloki is an adolescent ADHD male with a 'pick me' attitude. Quix is a good hugger and Chokko has one gear: nice and slow."

The high point of the llama trek is the photo shoot, where visitors line up to hug, feed, and pet their llamas, while Phinney uses their cellphones to capture individual shots, couples portraits, family photos, and action shots.

"The reactions I've captured are priceless," Phinney said. "People leave with smiles on their faces and with something concrete they can share with family and friends. The llamas are more than happy to oblige." ■

Above: **A youngster gets a helping hand as this trekking group from the Floyd area experiences a full trek on a scenic, snowy January afternoon.** Right: **Anne Phinney with her husband, Rod, and their horses.**

If you go

Llama treks are offered daily, year-round at Moose River Farm, located at 168 Woodcraft Road, in Old Forge, The llama trek schedule in the summer is typically a full trek at 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. and a full trek in winter at 11 a.m. and 3 p.m.. Mini-treks are usually scheduled for the middle of the day.

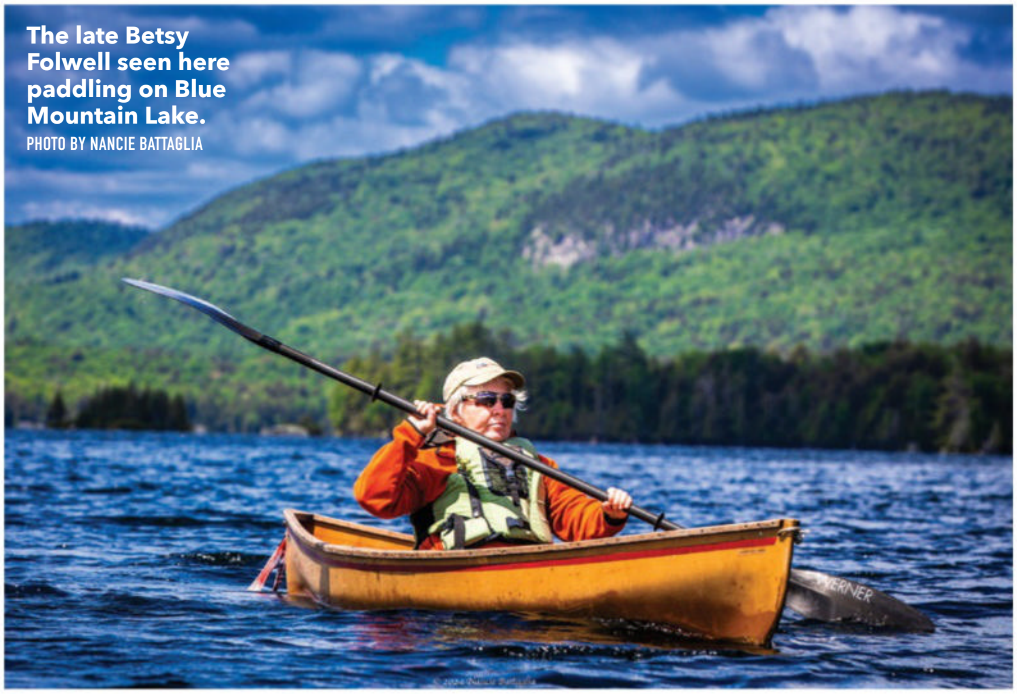
Those who wish to schedule a llama trek can make a reservation with Phinney by emailing mooseriverfarm@gmail.com or texting (315) 240-4707. For more information about Moose River Farm, visit: www.mooseriverfarm.com

JAMIE ORGANSKI is an Adirondack area native who has experience as a reporter, photographer and editor.

Betsy Folwell

A tribute to a trailblazer in writing and life

BY LEIGH HORNBECK



The late Betsy Folwell seen here paddling on Blue Mountain Lake.
PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Strictly speaking, Betsy Folwell was my parents' friend, not mine. I was the kid who tagged along. My parents, Ann and Pete Hornbeck, met Betsy and her husband, Tom Warrington, in the mid-1970s when I was a baby. They were all young, scrappy and new to the Adirondacks. It was a perfect place for people skeptical of institutions and suburbia. They bonded over a shared love for wilderness.

My impression of Betsy was shaped by my father's respect for her. My father was irreverent, more comfortable telling a funny story than expressing the sincere emotions he felt inside. He was not quick to words of admiration, but he adored Betsy. And because I was a kid and rarely heard him lavish this kind of praise on anyone, I accepted it as gospel. Betsy was the smartest person we knew. There was nothing Betsy didn't know. He liked to play a game called "Stump Betsy." She had a photographic memory. On the rare occasions she didn't know the answer to something, Dad was incredulous. I wonder if the adulation embarrassed her. She was modest, never showy, never attention-seeking, but she understood my father. Her approval was deeply important to him.

Betsy was part of my family, although we are not related. I am an only child and I didn't grow up close to the family I am related to by blood. Betsy and Tom were constants. We were frequently guests at each other's houses for dinner. Betsy and my father shared a birthday, 10 years apart, and they often celebrated it together. As if it wasn't cold enough in the North Country in January, Mom, Dad, Betsy and Tom often traveled to Montreal. Sometimes I joined them. I remember a trip to Ottawa when we ice-skated on the canal.

Betsy was one of the women in my orbit who taught me how to be in the world, although her lessons were subtle and indirect. I was intimidated by her as I grew up and took my first shaky steps along the road she traveled as a writer. She was talented and typically soft-spoken, the kind of person who radiates strength and confidence. I had an internship at Adirondack Life the summer I graduated from college during her time as the editor of the magazine. I can still remember her walking through the hot, old church in Jay where the staff has its offices. Betsy was tiny, not even 5 feet tall. I can't remember her ever raising her voice. She had small, doll-like hands. But she commanded respect. I could see it on the faces of everyone there. She was exacting in her expectations of writing and taught me to read copy backward when your eyes are too tired to find mistakes.

Elizabeth "Betsy" Folwell died Jan. 5 at her home in Blue Mountain Lake after a long fight with cancer. The longtime editor of Adirondack Life magazine was known for her skills as a writer, and her fierce devotion to the Adirondacks.

Going blind would be horrible for anyone, but seemed especially cruel for Betsy, a writer with a photographic memory. Years ago she wrote about just missing seeing a moose before she lost her sight and then missing the chance on the trail later, after the optic nerve failed in one eye and then the other. The disability took away some of her independence, but Betsy was still Betsy. She continued to write, travel, cook and spend time outside with help from friends and Tom, her loving partner.

When she was diagnosed with cancer, she pushed through it with the same resolve. She kept finding things that brought her joy, and doing them, and finding something else. She kept checking on her friends, and nearly to the end of her life, cooked gluten-free meals for my mother, whose own experience with cancer left her allergic to gluten.

I had wonderful conversations with Betsy as an adult, but I left too many words unsaid. I should have told her, "it took me a long time to understand, but I get it now. Your confidence comes from being solidly rooted in yourself, in curiosity about the world and empathy for the people in it." I should have thanked her. All those years of sitting on the perimeter, listening to the adults talk, shaped me. I was lucky beyond measure to have known Betsy. ■

LEIGH HORNBECK grew up in the Adirondacks. The co-owner of Hornbeck Boats, Leigh and her husband, Josh, live in Saratoga County with their two children.

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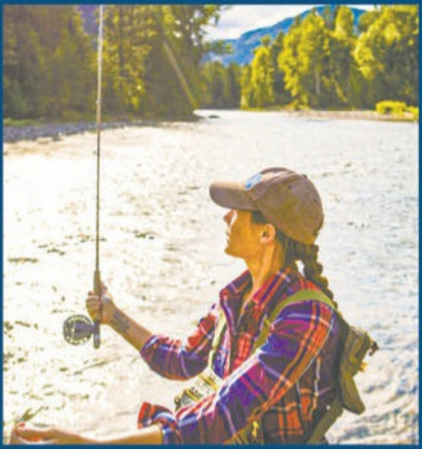

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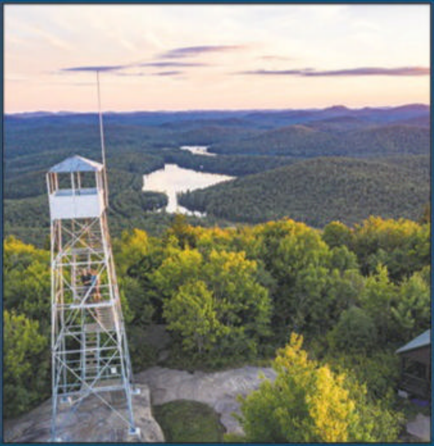

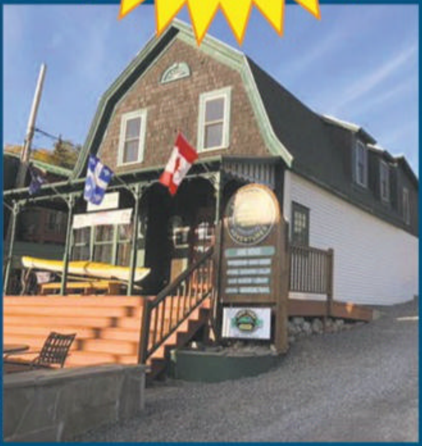

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A member of the Jamaican women's bobsled team. Opposite page: **In January 1988, the Jamaican bobsled team trained in Lake Placid prior to the Olympic Winter Games held in Calgary, Alberta. They used a sled held together with duct tape and sold sweatshirts to fund their expenses. The sliders are L–R: Devon Harris, Dudley Stokes, Michael White, Caswell Allen and Frederick Bowell.**

Cool Runnings, Part 2

Jamaican bobsled team builds practice time in the Adirondacks as it makes gains in the sport

BY DAVID ESCOBAR
PHOTOS BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

Before the Jamaican bobsled team made its world debut in 1988, its dream of Olympic glory began with a makeshift sled and an unconventional training ground on Mirror Lake in Lake Placid.

"I borrowed a buddy's truck, and we took our four-man [team] down to the toboggan chute," said Pat Brown, a former U.S. Olympic bobsledder who was recruited to coach the Jamaican team in 1987.

The team that competed 37 years ago in Calgary went on to inspire the iconic Disney film "Cool Runnings." Brown, who has since returned to Jamaica Bobsleigh as its development director, is now working to boost its program back onto the international stage.

Modest beginnings

Jamaican bobsled is steeped in a tradition of scrappiness. The original Olympic team helped fund its journey to the games through T-shirt and merchandise sales. Sleds and other sliding equipment were in poor condition, making the team particularly prone to accidents like the infamous crash that derailed its third slide at the Calgary games.

The team—and its equipment—have come a long way since its first Olympic appearance. Modern sleds are adorned with decals of corporate sponsors and the green, yellow and black colors of the Jamaican flag.

Since its launch, Jamaican Bobsleigh has undergone seismic transformations, sending men's bobsleds to seven Winter Games. The women's team qualified for its first Olympics in 2018, competing in Pyeongchang.

Audra Segree, road manager and assistant coach for the team, was the brakewoman for the two-woman sled that competed in South Korea. She said she wants to help the new generation of bobsledders reach the Olympics within the next two Games.

"I like where the program is heading," said Segree. "Granted, we have a lot to work on,

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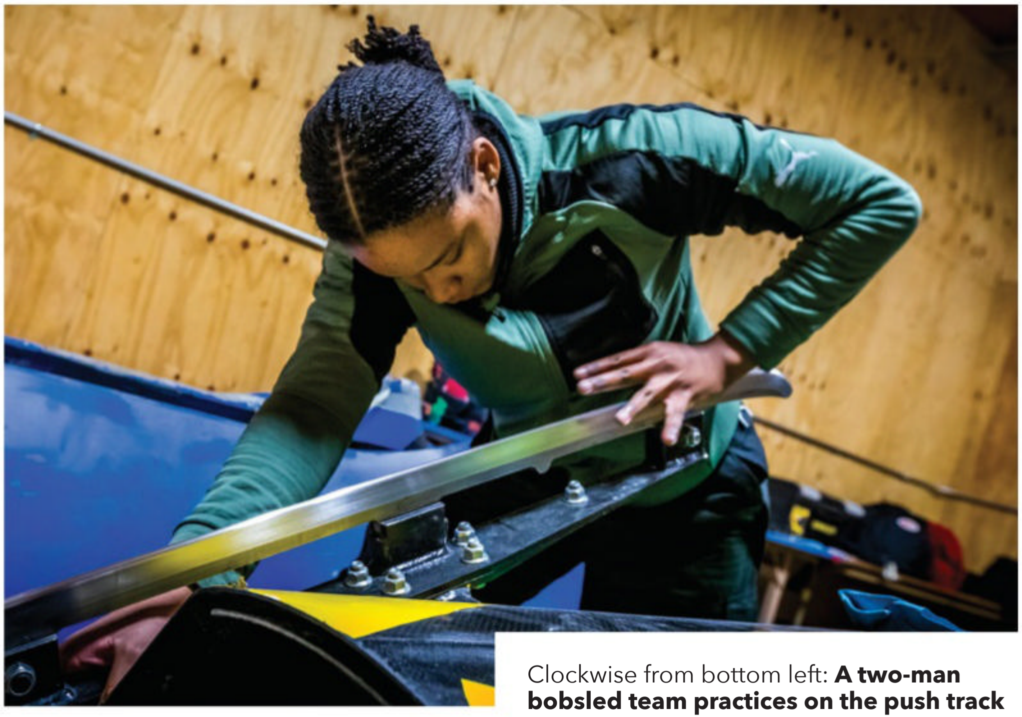
HOME AWAY FROM HOME

The 2025 members of the Jamaican Bobsled team train and compete in Lake Placid at the Mt. Van Hoevenberg sliding complex. Top: **Scene from 2025 Saranac Lake Winter Carnival of the Jamaican bobsled team marching in the parade.**



Clockwise from bottom left: **A two-man bobsled team practices on the push track in the Mt. Van Hoevenberg training facility in Lake Placid; team members fuel up at the Hotel Saranac restaurant; Adanna Johnson, 17, works on a sled; team members and coaches review practice footage.**

but it's good to say we have a start."

The current team raises funds to pay for some of its expenses, and sustaining support has started to materialize. In addition to securing corporate sponsorships, North Country Sports Council, which represents the team, brokered a deal with Hotel Saranac in 2024 to establish the team's headquarters in downtown Saranac Lake.

Regular fixtures in the Adirondacks

Now, with a more permanent home, the Jamaican team is poised to become a staple of the Saranac Lake community, all while in pursuit of their country's first Olympic medal in bobsled. The results have been promising, with athletes competing in tournaments around the world to gradually improve the team's overall ranking. To reach its goal of Olympic glory by 2030, the federation is tapping a new crop of emerging talent, such as 17-year-old Adanna Johnson, to be the new face of its iconic brand.

"This is a sport where you can stay in it for a while before you have to retire," said Johnson. "I'm really grateful that I can start at such a young age to progress and just improve overall."

Over the past four decades, a throughline for the Jamaican team has been its practice time at Mt. Van Hoevenberg, one of just three Olympic-level sliding tracks in North America. One of the team's most significant tasks has been mastering proper technique on the push track, an icy surface where the athletes practice launching the sled. Many of the team members honed their athletic abilities with other sports before taking on bobsledding due to the absence of winter in their tropical home country.

Tyreek Bucknor, 23, is part of a two-man sled competing at the North American Cup at the end of January. He spent the day before his race practicing on the push track, where he diligently studied his body stance on a replay screen between runs. The learning process, he said, cannot be rushed.

"It's something that looks easy when you watch it on film," said Bucknor. But when it comes to doing it, it takes a lot of repetition, a lot of days of work."

Training for an Olympic event can be a full-time job, and bobsleigh is no exception. Strength and conditioning workouts are constant, but while in the Adirondacks, Bucknor said the team will optimize its time on the ice to practice technique.

"We don't have the resources and the ability to train as well as other teams like the U.S.," said Bucknor. "Whatever time we get, we make a lot of use of it, and we still stay competitive."

With every run down the ice at Mt. Van Hoevenberg, the Jamaican team gains experience—and on race day, qualification points —invaluable to its dream of returning to the Olympics. Whether the team is ready for the competition by 2026, 2030 or beyond, team member Shane Pitter, 25, said his expectations are high.

"We want to do well in the Olympics, so there could even be another 'Cool Runnings,'" Pitter said. "We are the dream team now." ■

DAVID ESCOBAR is a Report For America Corps Member. He reports on diversity issues in the Adirondacks through a partnership between North Country Public Radio and Adirondack Explorer.

A winter triathlon took place as part of the 2024 Empire State Winter Games. The race featured a run, fat bike and Nordic ski. Fat tire biking is gaining in popularity across the Adirondacks.
PHOTO BY NANCIE BATTAGLIA

A bike for all seasons

Fat tire biking gains popularity

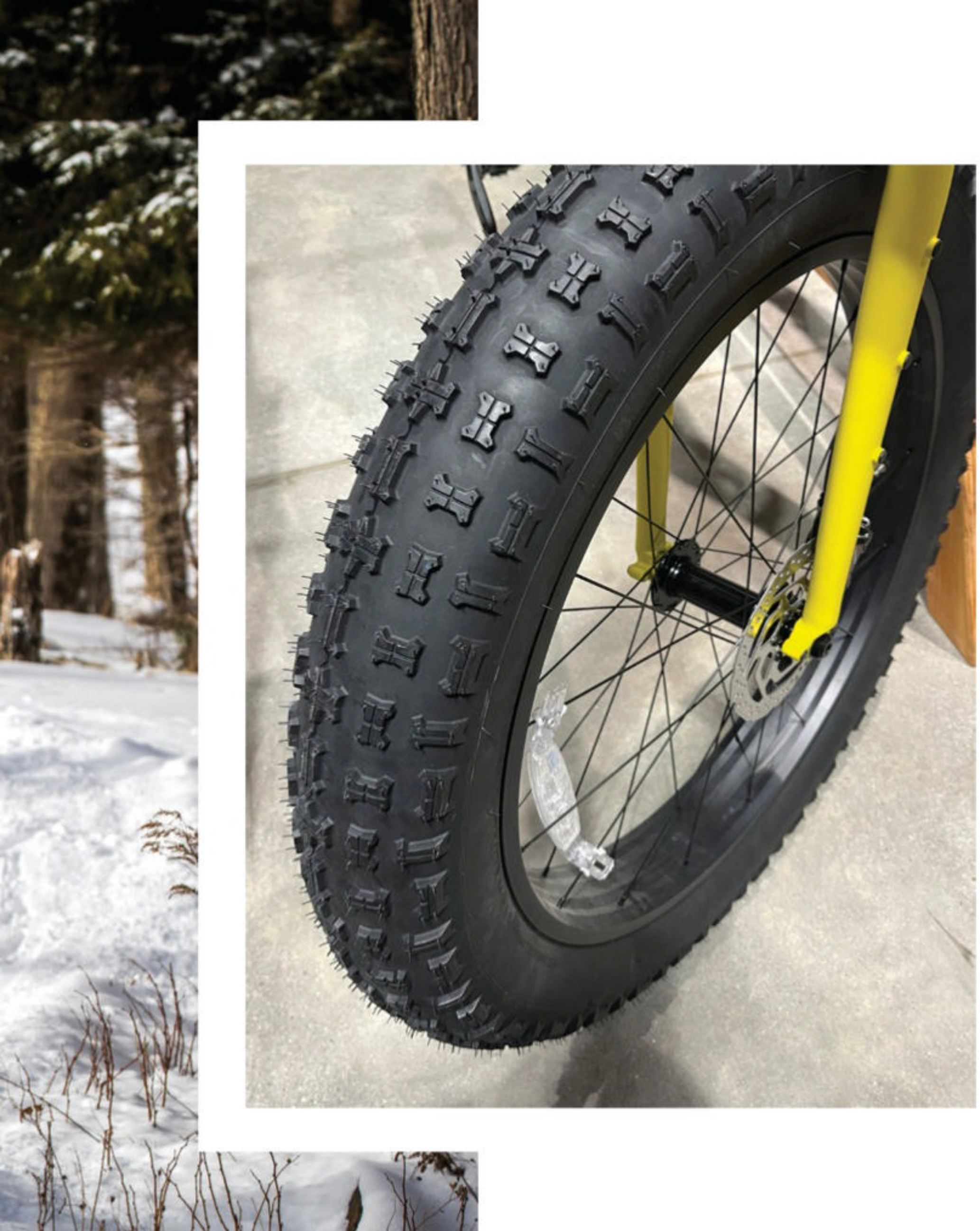
BY PHIL BROWN

As much as I love backcountry skiing, I have come to realize that Adirondack winters are unreliable. Frustrated by the frequent lack of snow needed for skiing, I took up two fallback sports, Nordic skating and ice climbing. For those who shudder at the idea of recreating on frozen water, there is another option: fat biking.

Fat bikes are not really fat, but their tires are, enabling cyclists to ride on soft surfaces such as snow and sand that would bog down ordinary bikes. Some people also ride them on mountain-bike trails: the wide, low-pressure tires float over rocks and other obstacles.

Companies started making fat bikes in the early 2000s. They enjoyed a surge in publicity and popularity about 10 years ago. The craze abated, but fat bikes command a dedicated following and global sales are expected to rise in the years ahead.

Justin Oliver, owner of Silver Birch Cycles in Saranac Lake, rides his fat bike year-round. In summer, he takes it on bike-packing trips. In winter, he rides the trails at Fowler's Crossing on the edge of the village.



“Fat biking in winter is one of my favorite things,” he said. “When conditions are good and nobody’s around, it’s just so peaceful.”

Even a fat bike can get bogged down in deep snow, so aficionados prefer to ride on trails where the snow is packed down by snowmobilers, skiers, hikers or other bikers. The surface of the Adirondack Rail Trail, which stretches from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake, is ideal as the trail is heavily used by snowmobilers and skiers. Of course, fat bikes also perform well if there isn’t much snow to begin with.

In January, I took a ride with Oliver to test the fat bike in a variety of conditions. Starting from his downtown shop, we biked a few blocks to the rail trail and followed it a mile to the Jackrabbit Ski Trail. We took the Jackrabbit into a piney woods and got on several other trails, including a former snowmobile trail and mountain-bike trails built by the Barkeater Trails Alliance (BETA).

As expected, the rail trail posed no difficulty. Nor did I have much trouble on the woods trails, which had been compacted by skiers and other users. I fell once when I squeezed the brakes and the front tire spun sideways. Luckily, the snow cushioned my landing. Oliver then advised against using the front brake. We later came to a short, steep hill that I have climbed many times on my mountain bike in summer. On the fat bike, I lost traction halfway up and had to dismount. Oliver, however, went up the hill with ease.

When we returned to the rail trail, Oliver headed back to his shop. I went in the opposite direction toward Fowler’s Crossing, where the trail crosses Route 86. My

WHAT'S A FAT BIKE?

Fat bikes are designed for riding in snow, sand and other soft surfaces. They differ from mountain bikes in three major respects: tire width, tire pressure and a lack of suspension.

Tire width: Fat-bike tires typically range from 3 to 5 inches wide. Mountain-bike tires are usually 2 to 2.5 inches wide. The tires of gravel and road bikes are even narrower.

Tire pressure: Varies with conditions, but in packed snow it might be as low as 2 pounds per square inch (psi). A mountain-bike tire is usually inflated to 20-30 psi.

Suspension: Modern mountain bikes have front suspension or both front and rear suspension to soften the impact of riding over rocks and roots. Fat bikes rely on their wide, low-pressure tires to cushion the ride. Because they lack suspension, fat bikes can weigh about the same as mountain bikes.

WHERE TO RIDE

In winter, seek out trails with little snow or compacted snow. Here are some suggestions, but keep in mind that conditions will vary greatly depending on snowfall.

Adirondack Rail Trail: This 34-mile route from Lake Placid to Tupper Lake is usually packed down by snowmobiles. Any other well-used snowmobile trail might be rideable as well.

Groomed trails: Craig Wood Golf Course and the Wheelerville, Peck Hill and Gurney Lane mountain-bike trails. Check Facebook for conditions.

Popular trails: Trails packed down by snowshoers and/or cross-country skiers are another option--for example, the Heaven Hill and Henry’s Woods trails outside Lake Placid.

Low-snow trails: Many trails can be biked if there isn’t much snow. When the snow is deep in the Adirondack interior, try trails on the periphery of the Adirondack Park, such as the Ausable Chasm Trails near Keeseville (parking fee).

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Justin Oliver, owner of Silver Birch Cycles in Saranac Lake, rides his fat bike year-round. PHOTO BY PHIL BROWN

intention was to ride the new BETA trail on the other side of the highway. This trail was not nearly as packed. In the soft snow, I often lost momentum and came to a stop. I then struggled for traction to resume pedaling. I improved as I continued down the trail, but the experience taught me that biking in snow is an acquired skill.

Oliver rents six to eight fat bikes a week during winter. He also collaborates with St. Regis Canoe Outfitters on bike-packing trips to ponds near the St. Regis Canoe Area. Guests stay in canvas tents heated by small wood stoves.

There's a reason fat bikes are sometimes called snow bikes. For cycling diehards, they offer a way to pursue their passion in winter. Volunteers even groom the mountain-bike trails for winter riding at Wheelerville, in Caroga, and the Peck Hill State Forest, which lies south of the Adirondack Park. Updates on winter conditions are often posted on Facebook.

"I fat bike in the winter, and I think the trails are fun to ride when packed in," said Rich Williams, president of the Adirondack Velo Club, which maintains the Peck Hill trails. "There are probably a dozen locals who are fat bikers."

Another indication of the sport's popularity: the town of Queensbury has held fat-bike races on its Gurney Lane trails since 2019. About 30 riders compete each winter, according to Steve Lovering, the town's director of parks and recreation. Both the Gurney Lane and nearby Rush Pond trails see bikers throughout the season.

"Fat-tire bike riding has been a popular pastime for the past six or seven years and has grown each year." Lovering said. "We have trail counters set up at both locations to track trail use, and they show a steady increase, but it is very much snow and weather dependent."

If snow biking seems here to stay, it remains a niche sport. Brian Delaney, owner of High Peaks Cyclery in Lake Placid, said fat-bike rentals have been steady for several years, but he has not seen a surge in business. In recent years, he has groomed trails at Craig Wood Golf Course for snow bikes.

Many who rent the bikes are seeking a novel way to enjoy winter, according to Delaney. "Fat biking is a great way to get out, get a workout and see nature," he said.

Kenny Boettger, owner of Placid Planet Bicycles, stopped renting and selling fat bikes three or four years ago. "There's a small enthusiastic following, but I don't think it's very large," he said. "Of the hard-core riders around here, there aren't a lot of fat bikers. They all ski."

Nevertheless, Boettger recognizes that fat bikes serve a purpose: "When the skiing is crappy, the fat biking is pretty good." The corollary is that when the skiing is good, the biking isn't. Nick Calogero and his buddies learned this when, at the peak of the fat-bike craze, they tried riding snow-filled trails around Old Forge. Videos show them plowing through deep powder and often sliding out of control. They still fat-bike when conditions are favorable, but for the most part they stick to skiing in winter.

"Without consistent, dedicated bike-trail grooming, areas with lower annual snowfall will be best for winter fat biking," said Calogero, a member of the Adirondack Foothills Trails Alliance. "Unfortunately—or fortunately for skier—those conditions are not typically found in the western Adirondacks."

But for those winters when snowfall is sparse, you might want to add a fat bike, Nordic skates or a pair of ice axes to your gear collection. ■

PHIL BROWN is the former editor of the Explorer and is the magazine's opinion columnist.

Steve Goldstein surmounts an ice wall in Hoffman Notch.
PHOTO BY ALAN WECHSLER

Desperately seeking ice

Out-of-the way ice climbs are all about the journey

BY ALAN WECHSLER

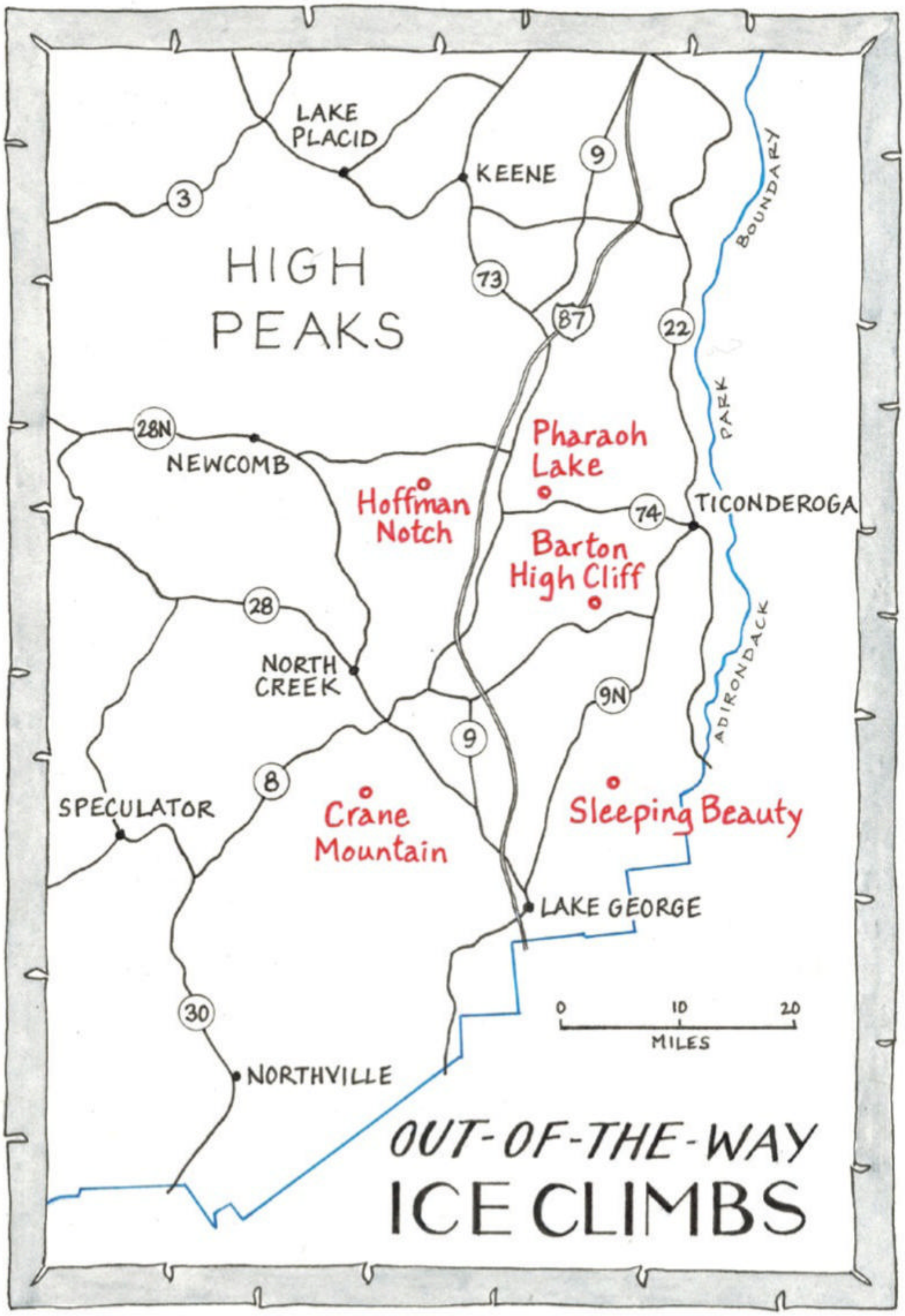
Craig Vollkommer wanted to know if I was fit before he took me ice climbing at Sleeping Beauty, a mountain on the east side of Lake George. He made it clear that it would be a long day, possibly returning by headlamp.

Oh, and there might not be any ice. We would find out when we arrived.

Ice climbing is a changeable and unpredictable medium in the best of winters. It's easy to get information about popular ice climbs in the Adirondack High Peaks, where hundreds of routes are focused in Keene Valley or near the Cascade Lakes on Route 73. These routes attract dozens of climbers each winter weekend, and perhaps even hundreds during the annual Mountainfest in early February.

> **Some are truly classics. Most require a bit of effort to reach. They all offer a chance to climb something new—and the promise that you probably won't see anyone else.**

But you don't have to go to the High Peaks region to climb ice. Here are some of the lesser-known areas scattered around the Adirondacks: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NORTHVILLE
OUT-OF-THE-WAY
ICE CLIMBS

MAP BY NANCY BERNSTEIN

Pharaoh Lake

Driving north on the Northway, as you're passing Schroon Lake, look right and you'll see beyond it a mountain with a faint, white line on the south side. That's what guidebook writer Don Mellor calls "the best moderate route in the park," a long ribbon of ice about 500 feet high. The hard part is getting there.

The cliff is more than five miles from the trailhead off Beaver Pond Road, located near the east shore of Brant Lake. The best approach is on skis via the Mill Brook Trail to Pharaoh Lake (you can use snowshoes too, but please don't bare-boot it, which should be a capital offense on popular ski trails).

When I went in with my climbing partner Ryan many years ago we skied past an arm of Pharaoh Lake and headed northwest. After about 90 minutes of skiing we ditched the skis and started walking uphill with the cliff vaguely in the distance. Another half-hour of bushwhacking later, we rounded a corner and saw the ice up close for the first time.

It was late in the season (you want long days for this trip!) and the bottom pitch was hollow. Yet it was strong enough to support my climbing partner Ryan as he led up 50 feet of tenuous climbing on snow-cone-like ice, finally finding much firmer blue ice (and his

The author completes a pitch on remote Pharaoh Mountain. PHOTO PROVIDED BY ALAN WECHSLER

first screw for protection). From there, several hundred feet of easy ice ribboned to the top.

If you want challenges, look elsewhere. But for a fun adventure that combines skiing, climbing and solitude, you can't do much better.

Hoffman Notch

My pitch to my partner Steve Goldstein was: "Want to get a first ascent?"

I had skied Hoffman Notch several times and was impressed by the number of vertical ice walls we passed. They weren't terribly high, but the ice was thick and blue. I was pretty sure no one had been back there. I mean, who would bother?

So on one cold January day, we snowshoed south from the parking lot on Blue Ridge Road, near I-87's Exit 29. After an hour or so, we reached the first of several prominent ice flows.

It was probably about 50 feet tall, with a fat central pillar and an ice cave behind it. Steve racked up and started to lead. A pileated woodpecker, visible on a tree nearby, provided a percussive accompaniment.

"This is tough," he said at one point. We were used to the popular climbs in Keene Valley, where after a few days of climbing the ice gets picked out, turning a smooth surface into something resembling a pegboard or ladder. But this ice was pristine—unmarred by human hands.

Steve, breathing hard, made his way to the top. Then he called down: "Hey, there's a rappel sling up here!"

OK, so we weren't the first climbers. But we were likely the first that season, at least.

A few years later, Don Mellor's updated ice guidebook, "Blue Lines 2," came out. It devoted seven pages to Hoffman and noted six distinct walls. We were intrigued to go back one more time to climb, and I continue to ski the trail regularly. Still haven't run into anyone else.

Barton High Cliff

About 15 years ago I joined guidebook writer Jeremy Haas to check out Barton in winter. I had been there several times in warmer weather, both to hike and to climb rock, but knew nothing about its winter potential. It's located east of Brant Lake and north of Route 8.

Getting there is a full-on bushwhack, but at least in winter you can follow your tracks back out (assuming there's snow). When we arrived at the cliff after a 90-minute walk in, Jeremy led a route now known as Cairngorm Corner. He even placed a piton, something I've never before had to remove in all my years of climbing. My climb was hampered by one of my crampons falling off; I hung from the rope and reinstalled it, which is a task best suited for the ground.

Haas must have seen something appealing about that place. A few weeks later, he returned and put up a challenging, 400-foot route called From My Cold Dead Hands. In his guidebook, Mellor calls it "a big, important route, a real prize." It's rated a bit beyond my leading ability, but who knows? Maybe I'll go back!

Obscure routes

Mellor's guidebook lists dozens of other potential climbing areas in the central and southern Adirondacks. I don't know too many climbers who have explored them; for most, you'd need a keen sense of adventure, and perhaps a compass.

Take Crane Mountain. The late climbing guide Jay Harrison lived at the base and had his own private path from his back door to the local ice routes. My friend Mike Hazard roped up with Harrison a number of times, but when I suggested we check out the ice on Crane, he wavered.

"Whenever we went, I just followed Jay's path," he told me. "I'm not sure I could find it again."

I recently got out with the aforementioned Vollkommer, a Glens Falls contractor. He was willing to take me out to Sleeping Beauty, where I had never climbed, and show me some ice routes—if they existed this winter. The routes aren't in any guidebook.

We met on a rare day when he wasn't busy with work or taking his son to hockey practice. We hiked for an hour and paused at a frozen swamp to survey the cliff from below. Instead of the gleaming ice flows that I expected, I saw just a few blobs of white scattered around the broken rock.

"Does the ice ever get thick here?" I asked.

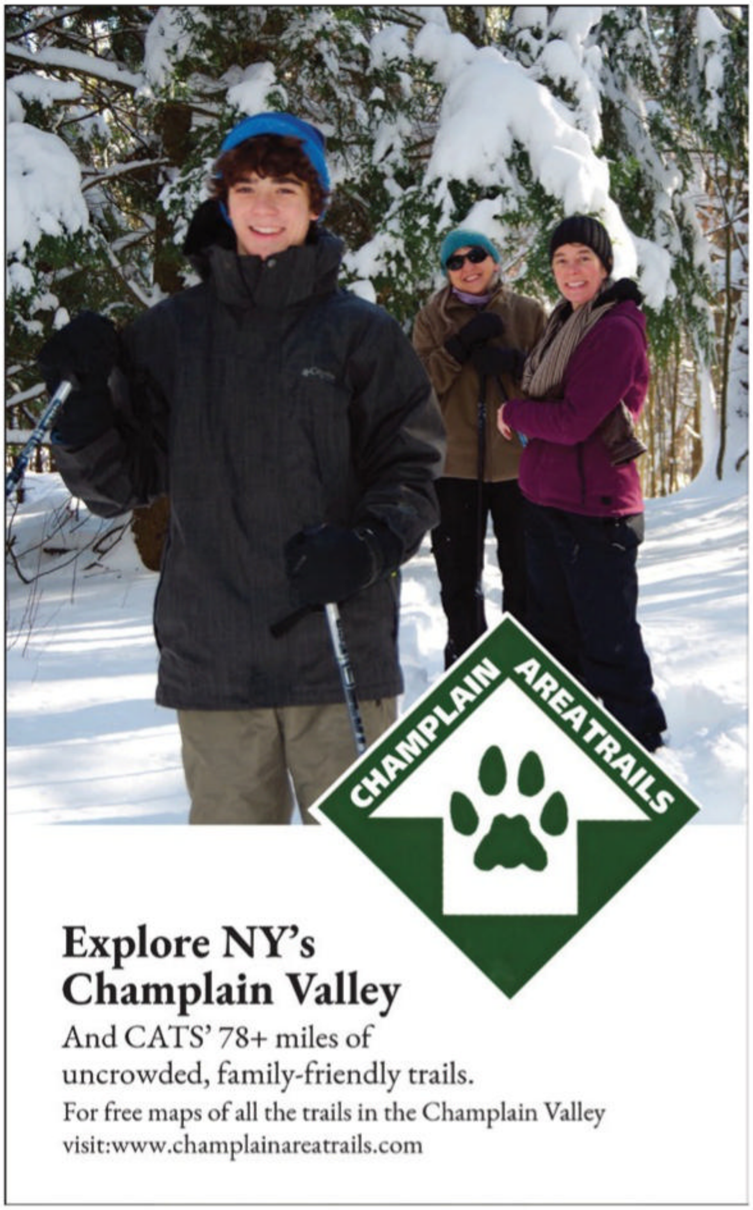
"Well, thicker," he replied.

I shouldn't have been surprised. A dry late summer and fall had meant lower water flows this winter, and some climbs were thin. We walked along the base of the cliff, until we stopped below a line called "Coco."

The route of disconnected ice followed a gully to a ledge, and then to a second pitch of only slightly more substantial ice. "I'm sure I could lead it," said Craig, who had been up the route eight or nine times before. I wasn't so sure I could follow, but I agreed to belay him.

He thrashed his way to the top of the first pitch, occasionally hooking his tools and crampons on tiny rock crimps, sometimes pulling on rock gear he placed in cracks, and then I followed. By the time I reached him, my hands were numb and I was out of breath. But I had to admit: it was ice climbing, of a sort. ■

ALAN WECHSLER is a freelance writer in Albany.



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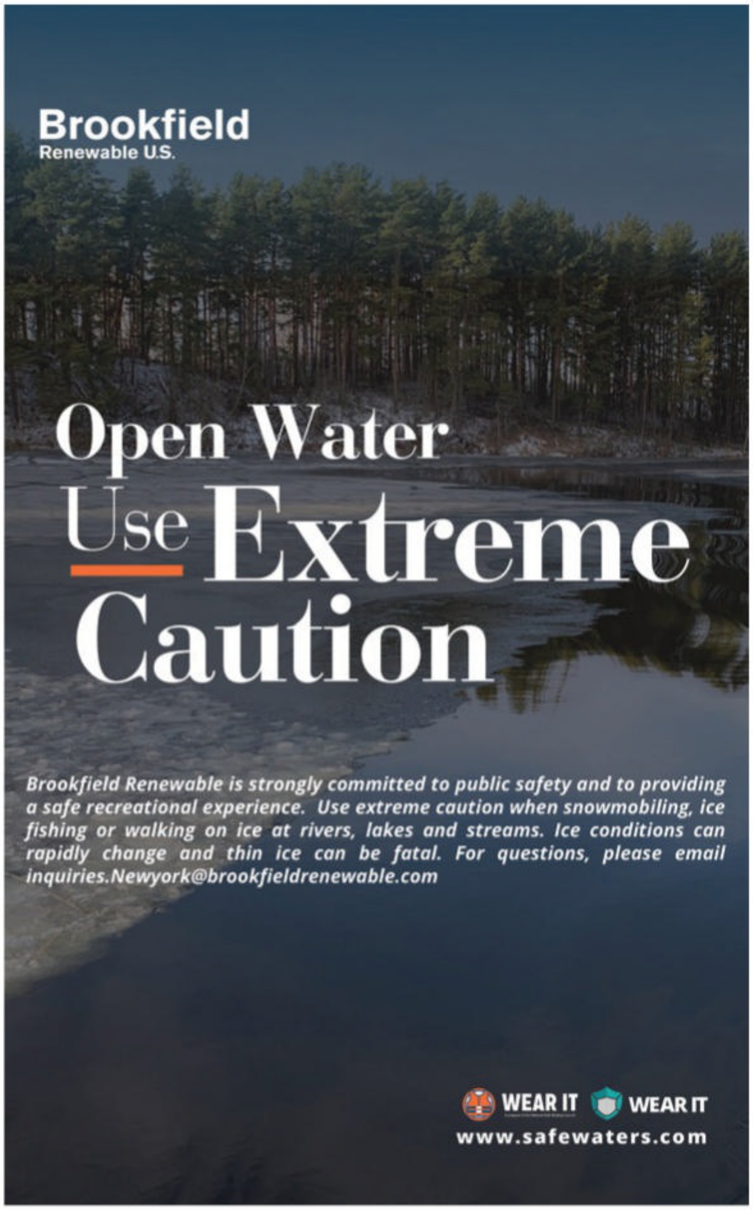

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A junction to Deer and Lead ponds is only 100 yards past the trailhead, but the paved section of the Old Wawbeek Road continues straight ahead. Look closely, though, and you'll notice the trail is actually curved. PHOTO BY TOM FRENCH

A ski through history

Old Wawbeek Road: Original gateway to Upper Saranac Lake

BY TOM FRENCH

The Old Wawbeek Road was the original gateway to Upper Saranac Lake. Until a suitable bridge was built across the outlet of Lower Saranac Lake in 1900, access to the many hotels and camps was by water or from the west.

The Wawbeek Lodge (later the Hotel Wawbeek) was established in 1889 as a five-story, 200-room resort. It was "sold under the hammer" several times before it was demolished in 1914 and replaced in the 1920s (dates vary) with a smaller inn. After 50 years or so of various incarnations (hotel, boys camp, ownership by St. Lawrence University, and base of operations for Sports Illustrated's Olympic coverage in 1980), a fryer fire erupted in the kitchen one week after the Sports Illustrated crew left. The conflagration was visible for miles.

The Wawbeek Inn that some may remember from the 1980s through early 2000s was actually a Great Camp next door designed by William Coulter. Purchased for use as a private camp in 2008, it too met its demise when it was torn down for a newer Great-Camp-style home.

Getting there and getting started

The original road winds around high points of land from Tupper Lake to Wawbeek. The best access for the paved portion is from the Deer Pond parking area along Route 3/30, 5 miles from Tupper Lake and slightly east of a NYDOT facility. Don't Google Old Wawbeek Road, as that will take you to the Tupper Lake side where access is across private property.

As you leave the trailhead, it may feel as if you're departing at 90-degrees to Route 3/30, but it's an illusion. A junction for Deer and Lead Ponds is 100 yards beyond the trailhead. That section of the road is not paved.

Our ski on a 10-degree day continued straight as an arrow through what was actually a slow curl to the west along the base of an unnamed 1,800-foot prominence with wetlands to the south. The silence of the woods was eventually pierced by the whir of rubber on pavement as the trail comes within 50 yards of Route 3/30 at what appears to be an old quarry and gravel pit with a striking rock face.

The trail again turns deceptively, away from the highway, and up a gentle grade for one half mile before dipping to an unnamed tributary of the Raquette River.

After another climb to what feels like the highest point ("climb" is an overstatement—the entire 2.3 miles barely leaves the 1,600-foot contour line of a topographic map), the trail drops to the turn for Deer Pond. Signs of civilization appear ahead on private property. The western side of the Old Wawbeek Road, with homes and pastures, is just beyond.

A sign points toward the Deer Pond Loop, though Doug said we needed significantly more snow to traverse its "gnarly steep hills, some of which end on narrow bridges." Just peering into the undergrowth where the trail enters the thicker Tolkien-esque woods was enough to convince me.

We'd been breaking trail, and even the freshly ironed, cold-weather glide wax on my tips and tails wasn't enough to overcome the gritty feeling from the frigid snow. But heading back, our tracks were compact enough to allow a couple nice downward runs on the subtle terrain. We spotted cement right-of-way markers and culverts from its days as a road. Our poles occasionally hit the blacktop beneath the snow.

Forestry school connection

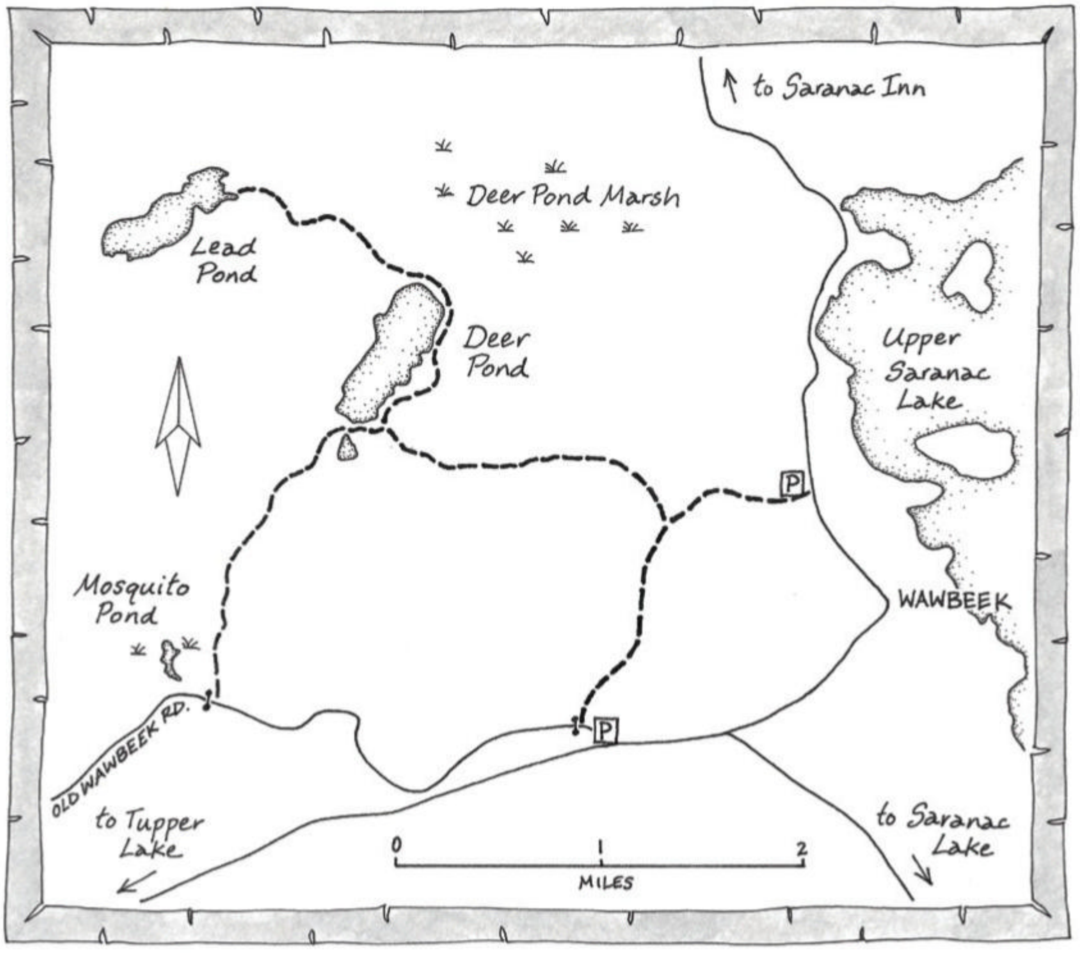
At some point, a spur of the Brooklyn Cooperage Railroad crossed the road near the nameless tributary, but any sign of it has been erased. The mainline ended at Crosses Clearing along the Raquette River across the highway from the trailhead. Built in 1900, the logging railroad was mired in controversy with the New York State College of Forestry at Cornell (moved to Syracuse in 1911) when wealthy landowners along Upper Saranac Lake successfully complained about the clearing and fires associated with an early experiment in forest management.

Bernhard Fernow, sometimes referred to as the father of American forestry, who was dean of the College of Forestry at the time, was attempting to convert the existing hardwood forest to white pine and Norway spruce. The Fernow Plantation Loop, a 1.1-mile interpretive trail, is nearby along Route 30 toward Wawbeek.

The experiment ended in 1903, and the railroad shut down in 1904. Portions of the railbed became part of Route 3/30 when it was built in the 1930s.

A CCC Camp that housed 200 workers was also built at Crosses Clearing in 1933 specifically to reforest the area from the denuding 30 years earlier. Despite the building of 14 large buildings, Camp S-63 was only active for three years (a cause for consternation in some of the papers at the time). Workers from the camp, many from Tupper Lake, were involved in creating fire lines, building 35 bridges (both foot and vehicular), clearing an 8-mile channel along the Raquette to improve navigation from Moody to Raquette Falls, and blazing trails to the fire towers on Mt. Morris and Ampersand.

Besides LIDAR and the occasional embankments, no signs of the CCC Camp or railroad are easily evident today. ■



MAP BY NANCY BERNSTEIN

TOM FRENCH is a freelance writer and photographer from Potsdam.

SHOULD MOTORIZED MOBILITY DEVICES BE ALLOWED IN WILDERNESS AREAS IN THE ADIRONDACK PARK FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?"

Let's follow the law and prioritize common sense over fear

In these divided political times, we should embrace following the law always, not just when it suits our ideals.

Thirty years ago, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation decided to ignore the American with Disabilities Act (ADA). It did not go well. There was a court ordered settlement that is still in effect today.

In a 2024 public hearing on amendments to the State Land Master Plan (SLMP), I listened as one person stated, "follow the NY Constitution, not the federal ADA." That seems to be what happened 30 years ago. It failed the state, and people with disabilities.

Another said, "do what you have been doing, [i.e. continue the case-by-case reasonable accommodation process], just do not change the SLMP." Attitudes like that really weaken a core document for the Adirondacks.

I listened to four men tell the audience, which included a woman sitting in her wheelchair, that people with disabilities had enough access and should be happy with what they have. Meaning the access that was wrested from DEC.

There's this idea that people with disabilities will be driving pickups and tractors all over the wilderness. Sorry, that just doesn't make sense. Clearly, those are defined as motor vehicles and not allowed.

The State Land Master Plan clearly defines what a motor vehicle is. Motor vehicles are not allowed in Wilderness, Primitive and Canoe areas. Allowing a motor vehicle in these areas could fundamentally alter the nature of the service, program, or activity.

When you look at the ADA's assessment factors for determining where uses of "other power-driven mobility devices" (referred to as OPDMDs) are appropriate, it is clear the federal government gives DEC room to say no to permits for use of them in Wilderness, Primitive, and Canoe areas.

Take an area like Santanoni Preserve, where use of motor vehicles already exists administratively. As a one lane wagon road with no guide rails, requests for motorized access would trigger the following safeguard from the assessment factors: "A public entity may impose legitimate safety requirements necessary for the safe operation of its services, programs, or activities." Personally, I am not seeing motorized use being permitted, barring a unique set of circumstances, with the draft changes to the State Land Master Plan.

A person with a disability must ask for a permit, detailing where they would like to go and what their mobility device is. Access with OPDMDs would be assessed for compliance with the following factors (again, citing the ADA Title II regulations on mobility devices, CFR § 35.137):

- The type, size, weight, dimensions, and speed of the device;
- The facility's volume of pedestrian traffic (which may vary at different times of the day, week, month, or year);
- The facility's design and operational characteristics (e.g., whether its service, program, or activity is conducted indoors, its square footage, the density and placement of stationary devices, and the availability of storage for the device, if requested by the user);
- Whether legitimate safety requirements can be established to permit the safe operation of the other power-driven mobility device in the specific facility; and
- Whether the use of the other power-driven mobility device creates a substantial risk of serious harm to the immediate environment or natural or cultural resources,

It seems clear, DEC has a lot of room to deny permits on Wilderness, Primitive, and

Canoe areas.

It is also clear the ADA requires the DEC to make reasonable modifications to their policies, practices or procedures to permit OPDMDs on a case-by-case basis.

Why would advocacy groups think it is good practice to ignore federal law? Potentially setting the stage for another ADA lawsuit, when in reality the potential for motorized use is so low in Wilderness, Primitive and Canoe areas?

It is disappointing to see how easy it is for permits to be denied for persons with disabilities. On what seems like the rare occurrence a permit is given in one of those designations, we should embrace the person's experience. Not stubbornly tell them they don't belong on Adirondack Forest Preserve land. ■

GERALD DELANEY, is the executive director of Adirondack Park Local Government Review Board, with a 25 year career in law enforcement.

It simply can't happen.

The very idea is oxymoronic.

"Wilderness Areas" in the Adirondacks will cease to exist the moment such new authority to allow public use of "other power-driven mobility devices" (OPDMDs) within their bounds is granted. Gone. There is simply nothing so central to what wilderness is than the protection of a beautiful, typically rugged natural area's communities of wild animals and plant life, from the variety of harmful impacts of motor-vehicle use. Our state's heralded, 140-year-long legal, planning and management effort and success in restoring such expanses of truly wild country here in our mountains would be wiped out.

If Gov. Hochul signs off on it, this would be the most regressive environmental and social law and policy change witnessed in my lifetime as a New York resident. I know of no wilderness in the U.S. (federal or state) where such an important protection has ever been revoked. I don't know of any other place in the U.S. where government staff have so angrily refused to commit to providing meaningful opportunities for people with disabilities to experience the sort of thrills, inspiration, sense of self-worth and accomplishment, inner peace and even psychological healing that wilderness experiences can provide. In Minnesota, Wilderness Inquiry teams up with the government to provide wonderful (motorless!) wilderness canoe-trip opportunities for people with disabilities in the Boundary Waters. In New Hampshire, Northeast Passage partners with the government to provide a variety of wilderness, motorless travel and camping opportunities in the White Mountains. But New York government officials would rather "open up the gates," encouraging people with disabilities to ride into what are now Wilderness Areas atop all kinds of motor vehicles, ignoring the fact that motor vehicles must be prohibited for everyone if these exceedingly rare values are to be preserved.

It is this lazy, ignorant approach that is the actual discrimination occurring against people with disabilities, as it outright denies them what real opportunities exist. It patronizes them, too, assuming that people with disabilities do not want or cannot successfully tackle anything in the range of physical and psychological challenges typically inherent to primitive conditions.

KEY TERMS EXPLAINED:

Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan: The leading policy document governing state lands in the Adirondack Park, including the approximately 2.7 million acres of Adirondack Forest Preserve protected by the state Constitution's "forever wild" clause.

Adirondack Park Agency (APA): The state agency that oversees public and private development in the park.

Other power-driven mobility devices (OPDMDs): Defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as "any mobility device powered by batteries, fuel, or other engines… that is used by individuals with mobility disabilities for the purpose of locomotion, including golf cars, electronic personal assistance mobility devices… such as the Segway® PT, or any mobility device designed to operate in areas without defined pedestrian routes, but that is not a wheelchair."

For a truly wondrous example of the right way to go about providing access, see video link in the box above. Be sure to listen to what participants say near the end. It's clear they would never want any wilderness destroyed in their name… supposedly on their behalf.

Explore more

Watch a video from Northeast Passage showcasing their work

That is what's near to happening in our Adirondack Park. I can't predict what the intensity of near-term and long-term use (or types of use) would be, but ATVs, UTVs, trucks, scooters of various types, tracked devices and you name it—any number of contraptions featuring motors for propulsion can all qualify as OPDMDs. (The proposed new definition of "Motor Vehicle" reads, "a device for transporting people… incorporating a motor or engine of any type for propulsion… [including] automobiles, trucks, jeeps… any type of all-terrain vehicles, [etc.]… but [not including] other power driven mobility devices"—which can be ALL of the above!) In New York alone, approximately 2 million adults qualify for "handicapped parking" placards (sufficient for establishing a person's disability-status claim), as do millions of visitors from other states. And the issuance of permits for recreational use of these motor vehicles could theoretically have no geographical bounds.

Do you love that quiet, half-hour walk or trail run on the Jackrabbit Trail to the McKenzie Pond shoreline? Prepare yourself for encountering ATV riders hunting up a little "wilderness experience" for themselves who'll zip past you on the trail. And I should plan to trek out to [not sayin' where!] to tell all those great blue herons nesting in that hardwood treetops-rookery to just quit all their squawking. They should be able to calm right down, as soon as I inform them that those aren't really motor vehicles rumbling down below them during their chick raising, since our governor will have used her magic pen, with a click of her heels, to remake them into not-motor-vehicles.

POOF!

"Hochul's hocus pocus." Like in some scary, modern sequel to "The Wizard of Oz" in which it turns out the horde of bad monkeys is us. ■

WALTER LINCK worked for the Adirondack Park Agency for 20 years. His primary responsibility was administering the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan.

WHEN IT COMES TO MOBILITY DEVICES IN WILDERNESS, MORE WORK IS NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT USERS WANT

BY LORRAINE DUVALL

Last December, through a FOIL request, I received the 2,074 pages of letters in response to the proposed amendments to the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan (SLMP). I was most interested in the letters that addressed accessibility and the use of Other Power-Driven Mobility Devices (OPDMDs) in wilderness areas.

I began organizing the responses applying the principles learned as a systems analyst and academic researcher in the computer field. I summarized the letters using the following categories: the PDF page number, support or opposition to the amendment, the role of state agencies, ways to increase accessibility, and suggestions.

Support for providing more accessible resources in the Adirondacks was universal. For example, state Assemblyman Matt Simpson, R-Horicon, submitted a letter supporting the amendment. His district includes much of the Adirondack Park. Simpson acknowledges the accessible amenities offered by New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and suggests they could be improved.

Meg LeFevre Bobbin, a member of the DEC/APA Accessibility Advisory Committee and a person with disabilities, expressed her support of OPDMDs. She ends her letter with: “By improving access, the state is affirming that everyone has the right to experience the healing, adventure, and peace that nature offers.”

The Keene Diversity Advisory Committee submitted a letter stating, “Everyone deserves the opportunity to enjoy the beauty and serenity of these precious lands, and we are deeply grateful that the APA is taking meaningful steps to increase accessibility. However, we believe that this complex issue calls for a comprehensive accessibility plan.” The group suggested simplifying the existing accessibility processes and programs.

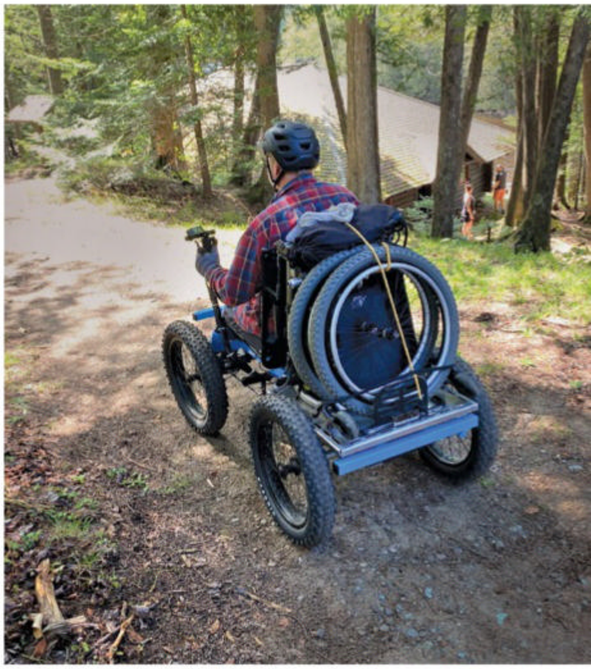
As I continued my analysis, I found the same message in over 700 letters opposing the use of OPDMDs in wilderness areas. As a systems analyst, I question whether these should be counted with as much weight as individual letters. The letters were most likely the result of a campaign by one or more environmental organizations. Also, there were duplicate letters from the same people on both sides of the amendment. With this in mind, I determined that the data, in the form of the letters, was not amenable to numerical analysis. I concentrated on the content of the letters that addressed the issue of providing more accessible opportunities.

Many thoughtful letters showed people cared about the issue of providing access to those less able while still honoring the Forever Wild clause of the New York State Constitution. For example, Jason Thurston, chairman of the DEC/APA Accessibility Advisory Committee, suggested the DEC consider the guidelines used by state parks. He hoped “that the development of a policy is one that is well thought out and creates more opportunities for people with disabilities to access more of the beautiful Adirondack wilderness without altering protected land.”

Peter Bauer, former executive director of Protect the Adirondacks, opposes OPDMDs in wilderness areas and supports expanding the Unit Management Plan (UMP) process to include conducting inventories and planning for additional accessible opportunities, primarily through the DEC Commissioner’s Policy 3 (CP-3) program, the permitting program currently in place.

Bob Reid, from Rochester, writes, “Please do not allow additional motor vehicle usage in our protected lands. Don’t destroy what we have undercover of helping disabled people enjoy the wilds. I have a 45-year-old disabled daughter. We find ways to get her into the woods. We don’t want to see motor vehicles where we take her. No one wants to see motor vehicles in the woods, including those in motor vehicles I’m quite sure.”

My experience in designing computer systems has shown time and time again that if you don’t know beforehand what the user wants, the system, at best, is useless—in this case harmful by opening up the wilderness to motorized vehicles.



Scott Remington tests the state’s mobility chair at Camp Santanoni. PHOTO BY DAVID ESCOBAR

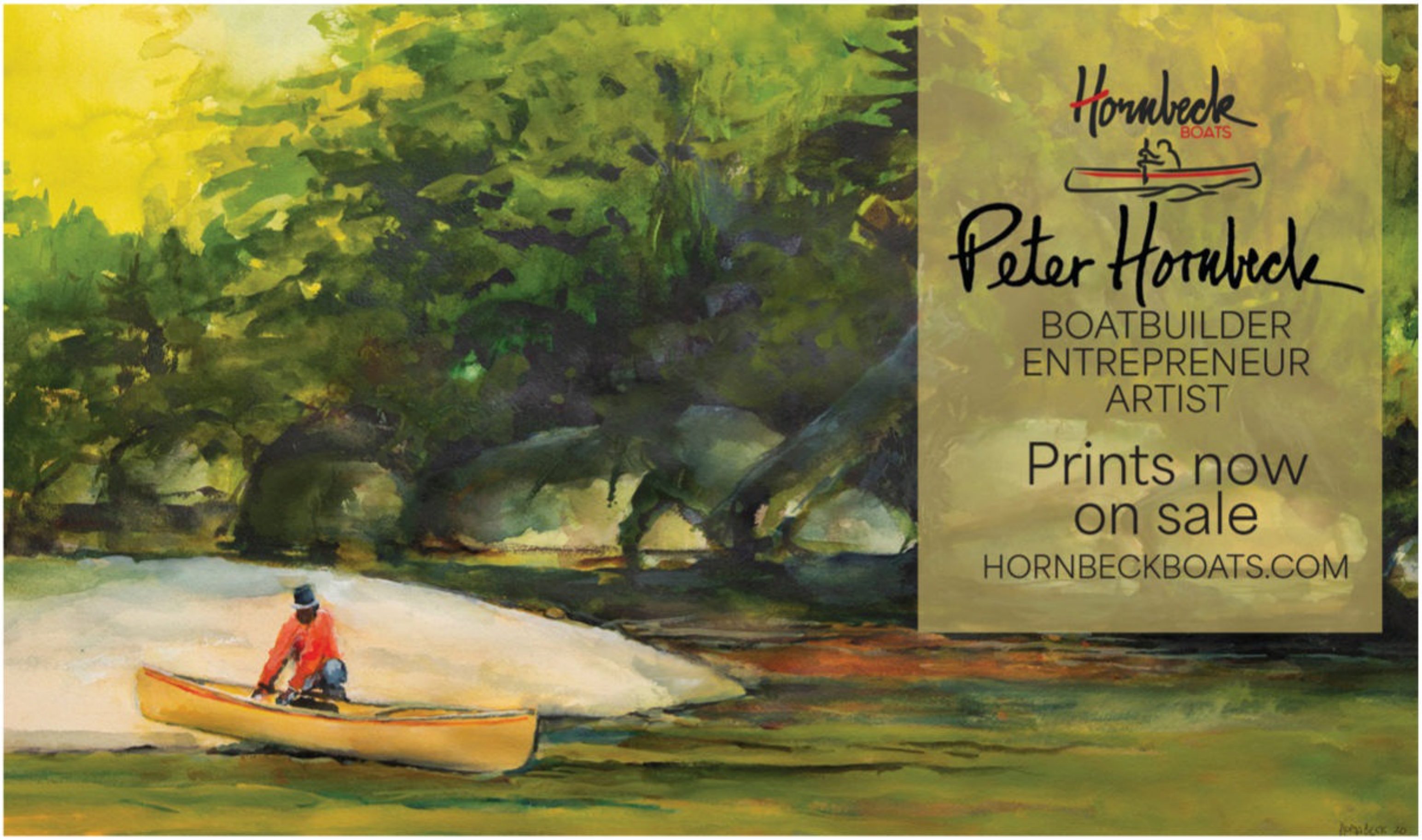
As an 86-year-old woman, I am one of these users. My joy is paddling my solo canoes on quiet wilderness waters, which are easily accessible. There are many. However, I’d like more, but not at the expense of the rights of those more able. In my letter to the APA dated Nov. 24, 2024, I called for a survey of user needs.

The DEC has an impressive amount of information about accessible recreation on their website including an interactive map of statewide destinations. I do, however, find it difficult to peruse this information. User friendly access to information is very much a necessity.

These letters are only a beginning for understanding user needs. I recommend that no action be taken on the proposed amendment until the needs of the accessible population is better known. ■

Explore more
Check out the NYS DEC’s accessible recreation website

LORRAINE DUVALL, Ph.D, after a 40-year career in computer software engineering, retired to Keene in 1999 and became an avid paddler of Adirondack waters. She is the author of four historical memoirs on the Adirondacks.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TEN QUESTIONS TO CHALLENGE BUSINESS AS USUAL AT THE APA

BY DAVID GIBSON

The Adirondack Park Agency's monthly public comment opportunities and long list of permits issued during the year are duly posted on the APA website on the Adirondack Almanack. This posting of basic agency information is positive. However, behind the apparent conduct of business as usual are important questions facing the agency and its state executive and legislative oversight in 2025, among them:

A rendering shows the Paul Smith's Power and Light Building at 1-3 Main St. in the village of Saranac Lake as the Adirondack Park Agency's new headquarters. The agency would build a 19,000-square-foot addition behind it and a new parking lot.

RENDERING PROVIDED BY THE ADIRONDACK PARK AGENCY

1 When will APA leaders brief the public about the status, feasibility study and alternatives analysis for a new agency headquarters? In 2022, $29 million was earmarked for a new headquarters (with an additional $10 million proposed in 2025). APA leadership unveiled a preferred location in Saranac Lake before considering feasible alternatives. The consequences have been costly for the village of Saranac Lake and for APA staff morale since 2022. Some manner of APA public briefing on this important subject has been promised since 2023 and repeatedly postponed. A consultant's report is rumored to be complete, but not yet released. Sunlight should be shed on these questions and soon.

2 What has the NYS Inspector General been investigating at APA since 2023? When will the public be informed?

3 In recent times, the heads of scientific services, regulatory affairs and legal counsel have been hired and then left after just a year or two of service. Why this rapid turnover? Is APA leadership providing employees with clear expectations and necessary support?

4 Is the Americans with Disabilities Act requiring APA to weaken State Land Master Plan restrictions on motorized uses in Wilderness Areas, or is it something else? Why didn't the agency's State Land Committee review and debate drafts of plan amendments and alternatives before releasing them for comment? Before amending the Master Plan, why shouldn't DEC policy about use of power-driven mobility devices on state lands be drafted and discussed?

5 This year, all seven citizen members of the APA will be serving expired terms, and there is one two-year-old vacancy. Will Gov. Hochul nominate new APA members in 2025, and what environmental competencies and standards will she set for nominees to oversee private development, resource planning, and state land protection?

6 The Adirondack Park is a treasure in which forests play a crucial climate mitigation function. Is Gov. Hochul satisfied with APA's performance in climate mitigation and lake/shoreline protection?

7 Will APA ever hold another public hearing to obtain independent, cross-examined evidence about complex permit applications in order to gather evidence to render an informed determination of no undue adverse impacts? The last such hearing was in 2011. Or, should the law change to authorize APA to deny a project without a hearing while providing project applicants the right to ask for a hearing in case of denial?

8 Does the agency continue to oppose 2022 legislation to improve the design of the largest private residential subdivisions to avoid forest fragmentation, and better protect streams, ponds, lakes and wildlife habitats? Why shouldn't APA adopt conservation subdivision design principles as the park standard?

9 Should the state Legislature hold a hearing about APA's performance as well as the needs and benefits of updating the 52 year-old APA law to better protect the park's resources during climate change? What regulatory changes not requiring legislation should be considered that might improve protection of park resources and the North Country's resilience during climate change?

10 Shouldn't future APA executive directors be subject to state Senate confirmation, like the DEC and other state agency heads?

One could go on, but I should stop. The APA remains a small, underfunded, vitally important state agency with statewide and national significance and interest. Despite an outdated law, the agency has a hardworking staff and lessons to share with the world. In 2025, it deserves stronger environmental leadership, investigative journalism, legislative oversight and citizen advocacy to challenge business as usual at Ray Brook. ■

DAVE GIBSON, who writes about issues of wilderness, wild lands, public policy, and more, has been involved in Adirondack conservation for over 35 years as executive director of the Association for the Protection of the Adirondacks, executive director of Protect the Adirondacks and currently as managing partner with Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve.

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The catharsis of movement

Finding solace in nature, and reconnecting with the beauty of winter

BY KLARISSE TORRIENTE

On my way in, I lost my glove. I was bummed. I felt lost—even though I knew exactly where I was. I was disheveled. The goal was simple, to bask in the cold with the wind on my skin: presence practice.

The silence met by the wind moving the snow-heavy trees frightened me. At times, the trees were like children screaming. The fear fueled the negative chatter in my brain. I just wanted to be in the moment. Instead, I was lost in ruminations and worry. Typical.

I chose the hike to Inman Pond on the eastern side of Lake George because I wanted an easier stroll with little likelihood of human contact. I got that. I set out to take my time and work on my photography. The conditions were great. Around 30 degrees, snow sporadically falling, whirled around by wind.

The weeks before were hard. I spent two months studying for my social work licensure exam. While I was ingesting theories, diagnoses, and ethics, my mom fell and broke her wrist. I worked full time, I started teaching, and led hikes for kids downstate. The historic Eaton fire in Los Angeles burned thousands of structures. Then there were mudslides. The inauguration happened, and people reacted.

In this chaotic world, I needed to move. For me, motion is cathartic.

Each step I took, the snow crunched. As I headed around the right side of the pond, I heard the wind pick up. A sudden squall. Catastrophizing, my exaggerated thought was avalanche. The absurdity made me laugh, bringing a sense of ease. I started trying to take pictures of the moving snow. The wind blew the clouds and the sun showed.

I walked around the left side of the pond toward the lookout. Ascending, there was a rock with a natural, Picasso-esque face adorning its side. I had nothing but opportunities for photos. I reached the top as snow gracefully gusted over the pond like dancers exiting stage left.

A hike to Inman Pond. PHOTOS BY KLARISSE TORRIENTE

After I could relax a bit, I felt like I got what I came for. To be where I was. I was blessed with seasonal weather and moments of clear visibility. I had taken the season for granted. Sitting out on the lookout, it dawned on me that it had been a while since my last snowy walk. Not by choice.

This is the coldest January in over a decade. Earlier in the week, I met someone from Los Angeles. She moved to upstate New York because she felt like places like the Catskills and Adirondacks were encapsulated by some sort of "climate change bubble." On a winter walk at Inman Pond, I could see how newcomers might think that. Still, her statement astonished me. I do not share that perspective.

Last summer, I witnessed the blowdown from tornadoes that ripped through Benson. The West Branch of the Sacandaga, once brisk and refreshing, was low and like bathwater. The effects of forest fires from elsewhere in North America made breathing during hikes difficult and uncomfortable the last two summers.

I gathered myself. Headed back to the car. I saw boulders covered with glistening ice. I aimed my camera. I photographed. I found my glove right where I left it. I no longer felt lost.

I wondered if next year I would be so lucky to have days like this. I just want to feel the cold on my skin. ■

KLARISSE TORRIENTE is an outdoor columnist for the Explorer.

Safety on frozen waters

BY PHIL BROWN

Dan Spada on wild ice. PHOTO BY MIKE LYNCH

If you like to skate on wild ice or ski across frozen lakes, winter can be as enjoyable as the other seasons. But if you're like me, you are irked—and somewhat intimidated—by the bubblers and similar devices that create large pools of water next to docks and boathouses.

Many times I've skied or skated past an open pool, keeping my distance but still wondering, How far is far enough? It's a question without a certain answer.

Besides interfering with winter recreation, bubblers disrupt lacustrine ecology. In the Adirondacks, despite climate change, ice remains a natural phenomenon. If ice is prevented from forming, more light enters the lake and the water stays warmer, altering fish behavior and promoting the growth of algae and weeds.

Is this even legal? In a park dedicated to protecting nature?

Unfortunately, yes. New York state has no law or regulation governing bubblers. That is not the case in neighboring Vermont. That state does not allow bubblers unless a landowner obtains a permit, and a permit is almost never granted. An exception is made to protect marina infrastructure used by the public.

Vermont's way of thinking is that lakes are public resources that it has a duty to manage for year-round recreation and ecological health. Bubblers around private docks work against those goals and offer no public benefit.

Vermont encourages landowners to use docks that can be removed in winter, though not all follow this advice. "If someone wants to leave their dock in during the winter it is done at their own risk," said Laura Dlugolecki, a lake-permit analyst with the state's Agency of Natural Resources. Yet complaints about ice damage to docks and boathouses are uncommon.

I have not heard of a skater, skier, snowmobiler or ice fisherman falling through ice thinned by a bubbler, but it may be an accident waiting to happen. A few years ago, a beloved pet dog drowned in Brant Lake after falling into a bubbler pool.

The White Lake Association blames bubblers for creating open water during a recent winter that allowed beavers to swim to shore and gnaw down 175 trees. Another issue is that a landowner's bubbler may impede a neighbor's or the public's access to a lake.

When conditions are right, I skate on Lower Saranac Lake, getting on the ice at the car-top boat launch on Ampersand Bay. Both the Ampersand Bay Resort and the state Department of Environmental Conservation operate bubblers near the launch. One day this winter, the pools created by these bubblers merged, preventing access. To be fair, this happened after a thaw. Normally, you can get on the ice from the launch. However, I've been told that bubblers also make it difficult to access ice from the public launch on Lake Placid.

Dan Spada, an avid wild-ice (or Nordic) skater, has seen a proliferation of bubblers over the years, especially on wealthier waters such as Lake Placid and Upper Saranac Lake. He doesn't think the devices need to be banned or strictly regulated as in Vermont, but he does see a need to educate landowners to minimize their impact.

Spada notes that owners tend to run bubblers 24 hours a day throughout the entire winter. In addition to wasting energy, this allows pools to form that are much larger than necessary to protect a dock or boathouse. He suggests running bubblers intermittently to reduce the size of pools.

Another idea is to install a boom in the water to contain the pool. DEC does this at its boathouse on Lower Saranac Lake.

Unlike me, Spada is not bothered much by bubblers. "We would rather not have them, but they're just a minor annoyance," he said. "You have to be careful when you're out there."

Spada, though, is a wild-ice maven who is comfortable skating near open water, poking the ice with a heavy probe. He wears a dry suit and flotation vest and carries ice picks and a throw rope in case he falls in. I suspect most people recreating on frozen lakes lack his experience and preparedness and share my trepidation at the sight of open water.

Educating landowners is a good idea, but it's not enough. The state should regulate bubblers for the sake of public safety, public recreation and lake ecology. ■

Explore more

Watch a video of Dan Spada skating on wild ice

PHIL BROWN is the former editor of the Explorer and is the magazine's opinion columnist.

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ON THE WILD SIDE

Bobcat Love Songs

BY EDWARD KANZE

If I were to produce a documentary about the romantic life of bobcats, I'd begin with a tom padding up to greet a receptive female. Meanwhile on the soundtrack, another tom, Tom Jones, would be singing, "What's New, Pussycat?" That 1965 hit is an acquired taste, one I confess to having acquired at an early age. I still own the original 45 rpm single. Every time I spun the record, it made the rest of my household cringe.

"Pussycat, pussycat, I love you," crooned the slinky Welsh pop star. This more or less is what a wild tom Adirondack bobcat is saying as he creeps close to a possibly receptive and unquestionably dangerous paramour. It's late winter. No summer of love for bobcats. Lengthening days in the wake of the winter solstice signal that it's whoopee-making time for wildcats and also time for the rest of us to listen for god-awful sounds in the woods.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The creeping of the tom bobcat toward the female is a radical act. Through nearly the entire year, bobcats live solitary lives. An Adirondack male may roam a home range of 125 square miles, a female less than one-half that but still a vast territory. Bobcats rarely bump into each other. In fact, they practice diligent avoidance. Each bobcat goes it alone, although there's a period when female bobcats are anything but solitary. In spring or early summer, they give birth to litters of one to four kittens, averaging two or three. The kittens are nursed for two months. Typically they stay with their mothers until fall. This makes mom bobcats not quite as antisocial as dads. After breeding, according to nature's plan, toms depart to seek other females and generally do their own thing.

Most bobcat mating in the Adirondacks happens in March. As reproductive hormones surge in the adults, males that had avoided other bobcats, females included, now begin to seek them out. Males fight each other sometimes, and sometimes in one of these brawls a rival is grievously wounded or killed. Readiness for mating may be announced loudly. The sounds thrill, or terrify, humans who venture into the woods after dark. Bobcats do much of their vocalizing between sunset and dawn. D. Andrew Saunders, in his excellent book "Adirondack Mammals," describes the wildcat repertoire as consisting of "squeals, screams, howls, yowls, hisses, and spits."

When two partners, each of whom is capable of maiming or killing the other, edge close to each other for love-making, the proceedings not surprisingly move at a measured case. For these relatively small (beagle-sized) but fierce cats capable of ambushing, leaping on, and bringing down prey as large as deer, a great deal of trust is required for mating.

In our neighborhood along the Saranac River, I've gone to considerable effort to photograph bobcats looking their best at courting time. They come to table scraps on our compost pile and leftovers given to me by friends who hunt and trap. Unfortunately, as things usually go, if a bobcat appears, it doesn't return for weeks. The hard-working predator has work to do. It's out patrolling its territory, finding fresh food, not hanging around where I can catch it with a camera.

This winter, I've been trying to up my game. With the help of the internet and the Saranac Lake Free Library, I've read everything I can get my hands on about these felines. One takeaway is that bobcats like rocky ridges for denning, birthing and basking. No such ridge rises near our place. Or does it?

PHOTO BY EDWARD KANZE

My son, Ned, a junior at Lehigh, and I set off to scout a distant hill. It's trackless, the woods owned by New York state, and we've gazed at it in the distance for years.

After more than an hour of hard bushwhacking, Ned and I hit paydirt. We found a steep wall of fractured exposed bedrock, which is to say, prime bobcat real estate. What's more, we found fresh bobcat tracks. They led straight to the rocks from a bend of the river near our house. ■

EDWARD KANZE writes about the natural world for the Explorer.

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The 'Boreal' Crossbill (or 'Spark' Bird)

BY JOAN COLLINS

If you spend time with birders, you'll inevitably hear the question, "What's your spark bird?" Most can immediately remember the exact moment and specific species that caught their attention, inspiring a passion for birding. Often described as an epiphany or turning point, it can lead to a serious interest in ornithology and connection to nature.

My "spark" was lit during a huge irruption of white-winged crossbills during the winter of 2000-2001. I was completely enchanted by the beautiful red birds that I saw on every winter outing.

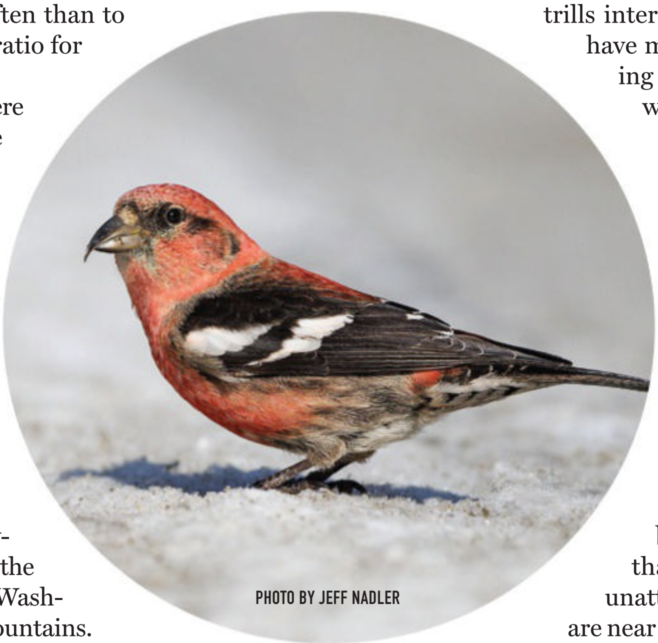

PHOTO BY JEFF NADLER

White-winged crossbills are medium-sized finches with crossed mandibles and two white wing-bars. Their lower mandible crosses to the right three times more often than to the left, unlike the one-to-one crossing ratio for red crossbills.

The lovely red birds I saw so long ago were male white-winged crossbills. Males are pink-red with black wings and tail. Females are greenish-yellow to olive-gray with dark streaked breasts and flanks. Immatures have upper and lower sides heavily streaked with blackish-brown.

Of the six crossbill species in the world, the white-winged crossbill is considered the truly "boreal" one. It has two subspecies, the two-barred crossbill ranging from Scandinavia to Siberia, and the white-winged crossbill in North America with a core occurrence across the boreal forests of Alaska to Newfoundland, and a secondary occurrence in the upper Northeast United States and the Washington Cascades to the Central Rocky Mountains.

Nomadic, they chase after abundant cone crops for survival, often traveling great distances with movements that can number tens of thousands. How they locate plentiful cone crops is a mystery.

Irruptions of white-winged crossbills into the Adirondacks are irregular, depending on food sources to the north and whether we have excellent spruce cone crops here.

Typically, during irruptive years in the Adirondacks, small numbers arrive in summer followed by late summer nesting, with larger numbers arriving in fall and breeding in the winter. There was no summer irruption in 2024, but by late October, white-winged crossbills began to arrive in our area, feeding on tamarack, and red and black spruce cone seeds.

They are highly efficient at finding and extracting conifer seeds, and can eat up to 3,000 seeds per day! A white-winged crossbill's unique crossed bill is used to pry open cone scales so they can grab a seed with their tongue. The seed is husked and then eaten. They often pick the cone first and hold it in the foot that is on the side opposite to which the lower mandible crosses.

Gritting is a common behavior in roads, on charcoal and the mortar between brick or rock walls. During the huge 2000-2001 irruption, I was standing with other skiers on the porch of Great Camp Santanoni when we observed a remarkable sight. A stone building next door was literally covered with white-winged crossbills gritting on the mortar between the rocks!

The white-winged crossbill song is a long series of trills interspersed with chirps and warbles. They have many calls, with the most typical sounding like "chut-chut-chut-chut" interspersed with "whit-whit-whit." Another call is a nasal sound reminiscent of a goldfinch or nuthatch call. Males sing from the tops of trees and in flight.

Nesting is opportunistic for white-winged crossbills, breeding at any time of year as long as food is sufficient to raise young. Females can have two to four clutches a year.

Males do not defend a territory, nesting among other white-winged crossbills. Courtship between monogamous pairs involves bill touching and males feeding females. Females build nests in spruces, often choosing one that's isolated with few cones, making it unattractive to predatory red squirrels. Nests are near water sources since they drink daily. The male feeds the female while she is on the nest, and both parents feed the young.

It is difficult to assess the population of a nomadic species that lives in remote northern areas not easily surveyed.

Threats to white-winged crossbills include habitat loss due to logging; short logging rotations that don't allow conifers to reach 60 years old for maximum cone production; decline of the boreal forest due to global warming; and death from trucks and cars when gritting in roadways.

What's your spark bird? ■

JOAN COLLINS is a full-time birding guide, writer and lecturer.

Adirondack actions

16 IDEAS FOR HELPING THE ENVIRONMENT THIS EARTH DAY

Earth Day—April 22—is an annual reminder that we can all do more for the environment. Here are some Adirondack-focused steps to take:

SPRING CLEAN UP

Perhaps the most classic Earth Day activity, with many events taking place.

→ **The Ausable Freshwater Center** (formerly the Ausable River Association) hosts an annual river clean up.

→ Volunteer-run **"Maintain the Chain"** features a range of organizations teaming up around clean up work along the Fulton Chain of Lakes.

VOLUNTEER FOR TRAIL WORK

Ways to help:

→ Help out the **Adirondack Mountain Club** during **National Trails Day** in early June or on one of their other projects.

→ On the eastern side of the Adirondacks, volunteer with **Champlain Area Trails**.

→ **Northern Forest Canoe Trail** hosts waterway work trips on a river or lake.

→ **Barkeater Trails Alliance** maintains ski and mountain biking routes.

PLANT NATIVE TREES

→ **County soil and water conservation districts** offer very affordable sales for the first few months of the year through their websites.

COMPOST

→ Start a pile at home or use a rotating drum.

Join a program:

→ Some local governments—**Warren County** is planning a pilot this summer—are developing drop off sites.

→ A number of businesses—such as **Blue Line Compost** in Saranac Lake, **River Valley Regeneratives** in Redford and **Adirondack Worm Farm** in Hudson Falls—have popped up around the park.

START A POLLINATOR GARDEN

→ The nonprofit **AdkAction**, through its **Adirondack Pollinator Project**, offers links to planting guides and seed distributors at **adkaction.org**. You can sign up for free seed packets and buy plants that can be picked up in June at the Adirondack Pollinator Festival in Lake Placid.

IDENTIFY AND REPORT INVASIVE SPECIES

→ Educate yourself through programs offered by The Nature Conservancy's **Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program.**

→ Boat owners should **"Clean, Drain, Dry"** watercraft before putting in Adirondack lakes. Check out **Adirondack Watershed Institute's** website for a list of locations they staff rinsing stations.

→ Report possible sightings through **imapinvasives.org.**

INVEST IN CLEAN ENERGY

→ Staff at **Adirondack North Country Association**, which runs the North Country's **Clean Energy Hub**, helps homeowners, businesses and municipalities figure out which solutions will have the most impact.

→ Reach out to your electricity provider to see what other options are available to you for buying renewable energy.

—Mike Lynch, Melissa Hart

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As we celebrate 50 years of advocacy and conservation leadership in 2025, we extend our heartfelt thanks to our members and supporters. Your dedication, passion, and commitment to preserving the Adirondacks have made a lasting impact on this national treasure. We are excited to continue serving you and the Park for generations to come. Thank you!

VISIT US AT ADIRONDACKCOUNCIL.ORG

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